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MR. MARGATE'S MERMAID

by
Robert
Bloch





Imaginative Tales#4

MARCH 1955

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Mr. Margate's Mermaid

by

Robert Bloch

CHAPTER I

THE man at the employment agency gave me a long look. "Why do you keep coming back?" he muttered, wearily. "There's nothing for you. I've told you that a dozen times."

I lost my patience.

"What's wrong with me?" I snapped. "I've done everything the books advise. Look at me—my shoes are shined. My trousers are worn but neatly pressed. I haven't got unsightly pores, or dandruff or five o'clock shadow. I use a deodo-

rant. My fingernails are clean."

Despite himself, I could see that he was impressed. I pursued my advantage.

"I smile pleasantly, don't I? My handclasp is firm isn't it? Look!" As a crowning gesture I produced a handkerchief and waved it under his nose. "See?" I exclaimed, triumphantly. "No tattle-tale gray."

The employment man sat up and then shrugged.

"I know all that," he conceded. "You come up to all the specifications except one, as far as a job is concerned."

"And what's that?" I asked.

"You can't *do* anything."

I kept still. I knew he had me there.

"Listen, Mister," he said, patiently. "Your card says you're a writer. And we just don't get any calls for writers. Now if you could only do something useful—like plumbing for instance. Or if you were an arc-welder. Lots of calls for arc-welders."

"But no. You're useless. All you can do is write." A slight sneer crossed his face. "Can't even operate a lathe," he accused.

I bowed my head. It was true. I couldn't operate a lathe.

"But I can type," I suggested, desperately. "You surely must get plenty of calls for a stenographer."

He grunted. "Wouldn't you look cute now, sitting on a business

man's lap?"

"Never thought of that."

He rose from his desk. "So you see how it is. You're just not the type. Too puny for outdoor work or the army. Haven't got a chance in a factory. My advice to you is to go back home and start pounding the typewriter again."

I faced him and bowed.

"A very excellent suggestion," I agreed. "But there are one or two slight difficulties. To begin with, as of this morning I no longer have a home. Nor a typewriter. My landlady is in possession of both."

The employment man sighed sympathetically. "Sure tough. There must be some way out. Wonder what I'd do if I were in your shoes."

"Have them re-soled, probably," I told him. "My feet are touching the pavement."

"Must be something," he muttered, scratching his head. "Writer, huh? Inside work. Hey—maybe I've got it!"

He faced me across the desk and his voice dropped.

"Would you mind going to work for a screwball?" he asked.

"What do you mean, a lunatic?"

"No. Of course not. Why this guy is a millionaire. He's just kind of eccentric."

"You mean that if he were poor he'd be crazy."

"What do you care? A job's a

job, and this is a good berth, if you fill the bill. Ever hear of Julius Margate?"

"No."

"Lives uptown. In a mansion, no less! I've checked. He called in last week— let me see now, if I can find the order." He hustled around opening a card file.

"Here it is. Yes, Julius Margate. He wants a house man. \$200 a month, plus room and board."

"\$200 a month and keep for such a job? He must be whacky!" I exclaimed.

"Wait. Listen to this. Man selected must be fond of animals, able to climb trees, a good horseman; must have Type C blood and an I. Q. of 180 or higher."

He looked at me.

"Well?"

I SMILED. "Happen to know my blood type is okay," I answered. "Got a transfusion once. I've got an I. Q. record lying around that I think I can get my hands on. I haven't climbed a tree for ten years, but I guess I can manage. I used to ride pretty well. I'm not fond of animals— but for \$200 a month and keep I'll sleep with a rhinoceros."

"Maybe you'll do at that," commented the employment man. "I'll call up Margate and see what he says. Drop back this afternoon around two."

"Doesn't he want me to go out there for an interview?"

"No. Told you he sounded like a screwball. Insists on phone interviews only. Says when he selects a man he'll send a guide down to take you to his place."

I let it go at that.

Promptly at two I returned. The employment agent was waiting for me. He ushered me into the private office at once.

"You've got the job," he informed me. "And you start today. Your things will be called for. All ready to go?"

"Suits me."

"Sign here. Usual commission."

I signed.

"What about that guide?" I asked.

"He's waiting for you now in the outer office."

I paused. "I didn't see anyone there," I objected. "That is, nobody but a blind man."

"He's your guide," the employment agent told me. "I warned you Margate was a screwball."

We went back to the outer office. The fat blind man with the striped cane rose as we entered.

"Here he is," said the employment man. He introduced me "And this is Captain Hollis."

"Pleased to meet up with you." The captain's voice was a jovial boom. He grasped my hand, held it. "Sure we'll get along fine. Boss

ought to like you. You got long fingers. Like eels. Artistic, ain't you?"

"Writer," I admitted.

"Well ain't that swell, dammit! Boss likes writers. Thinks they're just too stinking intellectshool. He's pretty intelleschool himself. But let's heave anchor. The car's outside."

We left the building. Captain Hollis led the way, cane and all. He moved with marvelous celerity for a sightless man. He found the elevators and his cane pressed the *down* button with unerring accuracy.

He threaded his way through the outer lobby, using his cane for a needle. And once in the street, he walked directly toward a large gray limousine which stood resplendently at the curb.

A uniformed chauffeur opened the door. "This is Dave," the captain told me.

"Pleased to meet you," I said, climbing in.

"He's deaf." The captain thrust his face forward and his lips moved repeating my name and greeting.

Dave smiled. "Glad you're with us. The Boss is gonna like you, I guess. You wear glasses. I'll bet you read a lot."

The limousine moved out into the traffic as we sat back. I turned to Captain Hollis.

"How about giving me a few tips

on my new employer?" I asked. "He seems to be a most remarkable man."

"Who, the Boss? Listen, remarkable ain't the word for that guy. Some people might think he was a little balmy, but they just don't understand him. Kindest man in the world. Big hearted? Why, he loves everybody. He loves people you and I wouldn't put up with in a nightmare."

The captain shivered slightly. It was a startling phenomenon in so large a man.

"Not that I'm saying a word against the house-guests, you understand. They're all nice, decent folks in their way. But what a way!"

He shivered again.

"That's why I'm glad you're taking this job. I've been helping the Boss out around the house. It isn't easy for me, without my lights to guide me, and besides I can't seem to get used to them guests of his. Even if I went and brought a couple of them in the first place. I remember snagging Jory in Hungary. Before the war, that was. Dammit, there was a voyage! But —"

"I don't understand. What about Mr. Margate's guests? Who are they?"

The captain ignored my questions as he leaned forward suddenly to address Dave.

"Wait a minute! I nearly forgot something. Jory wants some flea powder. Better stop at the pet shop on our way up!"

Dave read his lips and nodded. A moment later the car turned in at the curb.

"You go in and get it," ordered the captain. "Here's the money. A large can of flea powder."

I DID. It was my first act in the service of Julius Margate and I was oddly disappointed. After all this build-up I expected something better than buying a can of flea powder for a guest's poodle.

When I returned to the car, the captain was already issuing a further order to Dave.

"Dammit, I'm losing my memory!" he growled. "We got to stop by the dentist for Mr. Simpkins."

Obediently, the car moved forward. The captain turned to me. "You'll like old Simpkins," he predicted. "He's the best of the gang. Easiest to get along with, I think. Of course Simpkins isn't his real name. Talks with an accent. But the Boss doesn't care about a guy's past if he's working on the level now."

The captain chuckled. "Poor Simpkins kind of over-stepped himself, though. That's why the Boss made him go to the dentist today. It puts an end to all chances of accident."

His fingers went to my wrist.

"What time does your watch say?"

"Almost five."

"Is it dark yet?" His sightless eyes blinked.

"Yes."

"Good. Simpkins will be out. He was asleep when I brought him down. Lugged him up myself. He ought to be awake now. And will he be mad when he finds out what the dentist did!"

Again the captain chuckled.

The car moved on once more.

Dave turned his head from the wheel.

"There he is, waiting at the curb," he indicated.

"Does he look mad?"

"Boiling."

We pulled up.

I saw a tall, thin, middle-aged man with thinning hair. He *did* look mad—his eyes anyway. The rest of his face was covered by his cupped hands.

"Hello, Mr. Simpkins," boomed the captain. "Climb in. Meet the new house man."

He introduced me.

Tall Mr. Simpkins entered with a grunt. His black coat covered the seat beside me as he extended a bony hand. I grasped it, but not for long. It was icy cold.

"Gratified I'm sure," said Mr. Simpkins, in a burring voice. "You will excuse me. I am very upset."

His hand went back to his jaw as

he turned to the captain.

"That was a very bad thing you did to me," he accused. "Taking me to the dentist while I am asleep."

"Boss' orders."

"Ah! I thought so. He is a hard man, Julius Margate. Do you know what he had the dentist do to me?"

"What?"

"He pulled all my teeth! When I woke up a few minutes ago I was lying in the chair and my teeth were gone. All of them!"

Captain Hollis began to laugh.

"Dammit, that's rich! Beg your pardon, Mr. Simpkins, but that's rich!" The captain turned to me. "Don't you think so?"

"I don't understand," I answered. "What's so funny about pulling out all of a man's teeth when he's asleep?"

It was Simpkins who answered, sulkily.

"It isn't funny at all. Losing my teeth is the worst thing in the world that could happen to me. Because," continued Mr. Simpkins, in a dismal voice. "I happen to be a vampire."

CHAPTER II

CAPTAIN HOLLIS was a very strong man.

I discovered this when I tried to jump out of the car.

Mr. Simpkins was almost as upset as I was.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered. "I won't hurt you. My teeth are all gone, anyway. I couldn't bite you if I wanted to."

His bony hand pressed my shoulder. I winced.

"Honestly," he pleaded. "I never bit anyone even when I had my teeth. Julius—Mr. Margate—always took excellent care of me. Bought me canned blood, the kind they use in transfusions. Liver extract. Anything I wanted. I was never hungry."

"Best-hearted guy in the world," Captain Hollis repeated. "Besides you've got nothing to worry about. You're Type C, and Mr. Simpkins here is allergic to Type C blood; ain't you now, Mr. Simpkins?"

"Of course, There's nothing to be afraid of," reassured the vampire. He mumbled badly through his aching jaws.

"If you're a sample of Mr. Margate's house-guests, I'm going to have a pretty tough job," I answered.

"Not at all. Now take me, for example. I'm no bother to anyone. Of course, I don't like to have mirrors in my room, and I can't cross running water. You'd think I'd have trouble bathing, but I use liquid soap and oil."

"I don't want to know a vampire's beauty secrets," I retorted,

somewhat harshly. Mr. Simpkins looked glum.

"You don't like me," he accused. "Nobody likes me."

"There, there," Captain Hollis consoled him. "Of course he likes you. We all like you. Doesn't the Boss take care of you? Didn't he bring you all the way from Transylvania and put you up in his swell mansion? Doesn't he give you everything you want?"

"Everybody hates me," the vampire mumbled. "I'm going out and let the worms eat me."

"Don't talk like that, dammit! You're acting very ungrateful to the Boss. Why when we found you back there in Europe, you was starving to death. Sneaking into henhouses at night and killing chickens, you was. Living from hand to mouth. Thin—you was anaemic! And all the time afraid somebody was going to find out where you held up to sleep in the daytime.

"Now look at you! Got a swell boudoir rigged up down in the cellar. Nobody to bother you. All you got to do is come out at night and talk to the Boss. He's gonna write you up in his book, he says. You'll be famous!"

Mr. Simpkins smiled weakly. "Maybe I am a bit hasty," he conceded. "And I assure you I shall be of little trouble." He turned to me. "I am a noctambulistic soul. I sleep from sunrise to sunset. My

wants are simple. I won't bother you."

This was evidently meant to console me. It didn't.

"Listen," I began, addressing the captain. "You might as well tell me everything now. What about these other houseguests? Has Mr. Margate got a couple of zombies boarded with him? Any ghouls to feed?"

"The Boss? Of course not—he wouldn't have anything to do with no such creatures. Kindest guy in the world, But wait a minute. You can get the dope straight from him."

I hadn't realized it, but the car was turning into a driveway. We rode through an avenue of trees, hinting at spacious grounds beyond. The limousine pulled up before the steps of a large, rambling stone structure. The interior brilliantly illuminated, justified the captain's description. It was a mansion all right, and a big one.

We climbed out—Simpkins, the captain, and myself. Dave the chauffeur drove off to the rear.

Simpkins rang the bell. The door opened. No butler stood there. Instead, a pudgy little man in an ornate purple lounging jacket fairly flung himself out onto the terrace. His shock of gray hair bristled with an excitement matched by the gleam in his darting black eyes.

"Here you are! How's your jaw, Simpkins? Ha, ha—explain about

that later. Matter of necessity. Want to see you tonight. And you—you must be the new house man."

His hand pumped mine in a friendly, vigorous grip. "My name's Margate. Julius Margate. Sorry, we haven't got a butler. Can't keep them. Devil of a servant problem. Hope you'll be a bit more broad-minded."

He ushered us inside, bustling and talking in a quite breathless manner.

"Got a very good report on you from the agency, young man. Very good. Seem to be just what I need around here. So much to attend to, you know. So much. But come along—I'll show you to your rooms later. Right now, dinner's waiting."

I followed the short man and the captain through the long hall. We entered a spacious dining room. The table was set for three.

"You're eating upstairs, aren't you?" Margate called to Simpkins. The vampire nodded.

"I'll be up to visit later," said the host. "Want to take some notes."

He turned to me.

"Hear you're a writer. Fine! You'll be interested in the book I'm doing. Helpful too, no doubt."

We sat down, following Margate's example.

"Jory's cooking," Margate said. "Had him go out and take Trina

her fish. Gerymanx ate earlier. Took his stuff out myself. We'll have to teach our new house man how to feed our guests, eh Captain?"

Margate turned his gray head.

"Jory! he called. "Oh, Jory—we're ready now!"

Jory brought the platter in from the kitchen. I was introduced quite naturally. I correctly assumed that Jory was a guest, not the cook.

As far as I was concerned, Jory would be neither guest or cook in any house of mine.

JORY was a big man. Too big. His arms were too long and his legs were too short. He didn't have any neck. His hair was long. And plentiful. It ran over his forehead and bristled on cheek and chin. It sprouted from his wrists.

If he were my guest I'd insist on his using a depilatory. And I'd send him to the dentist too. I didn't like the look of his teeth when he smiled at me.

"You new house man, huh?" he grunted.

"That's right, Mr. Jory."

"Okay. Where's my flea powder?"

I'd forgotten about that little item. I took the can from my pocket and handed it to him.

"Thanks," he grunted.

His huge fingers tore open the lid. Raising the can, he doused his

head liberally with the powder. With a nonchalant smirk he unbuttoned his shirt and poured flea powder down his chest.

"Jory— please!" objected Margate.

"Huh?"

"The moon will be up in half an hour. I'll powder you then after you change."

Margate turned to me.

"Jory's a werewolf," he explained. I tried to get up. The captain tripped me with his cane.

"He changes every night when the moon is more than half full," Margate continued. "But there's nothing to worry about. I've got his lycanthropy under control. He doesn't get violent unless he sees the moon, and I take care of that. Make him wear dark glasses."

Jory shuffled out of the room. The others began to eat. I didn't feel very hungry, somehow.

"You mustn't mind Jory," Margate told me, noticing my hesitation. "He's crude, I'll admit. Illiterate peasant type. Hungarian backwoods, you know. Hasn't got the breeding of Mr. Simpkins. But he means well. Faithful as a dog, too."

"That's his only trouble. That canine streak. You know," Margate confided, "I wouldn't want it to get around for the world, but in winter Jory has a very bad habit. He *sheds!* Dreadfully. Usually

make him stay in his room. He prefers to sleep in that kennel in back, of course, but I see to it that his hamburger is waiting for him upstairs. Fleas bother him a bit, too. But not so much any more. When the captain captured him he was really—I confess—mangy."

Margate passed me my salad.

"You ever bathe a dog?" he asked. "You can give Jory a bath every so often."

Bathing a werewolf somehow didn't appeal to me. But I was past making objections.

"I'd like to introduce you to some of our other guests later this evening," Margate said. "But I doubt if I'll have time. I must talk to the captain here. Fact is, Captain, I've got another voyage planned for you."

"Now?" boomed Captain Hollis.

"Yes, for you and Dave both."

"What're we after this trip?"

"Never mind."

Margate glanced at me significantly.

"I'll tell you later. But it's the kind of thing I need you for especially. No one else could do it. And Dave has his part to play as well."

"Don't like it," the captain answered. "Risky business. Blockades and submarines and all. Where to?"

"Greece again."

"Russian-occupied."

"You'll get by if you follow or-

ders. You'll be using my yacht, you know. Little danger of being fired on. And the regular crew. They'll handle things. All you must do is follow the map and act when the time comes."

"Something hard to capture?"

"Very hard. Hardest yet. No one but you could do it. There's a bonus in it, of course. Make it worth your while."

The captain grunted. Margate beamed on me.

"Well, young man—suppose you're drawing your own conclusions?"

"More or less," I admitted.

"What do you make of my little household from what you've seen of it?"

"It's very—unusual," I ventured.

"Unusual? Diplomatic word. Very. Tactful, aren't you? Why don't you come right out with it and say you think I'm crazy?"

"Because I suspect that I might be the crazy one."

"Ha. Good! Very good!" Margate leaned back. He offered me a cigar. I took it as we sipped our coffee.

"Don't alarm yourself," he told me. "It's very simple. I'm a collector, that's all. Just a collector. Hobby of mine. Many wealthy men collect books. Some collect paintings, or antique furniture. I collect mythological entities."

"So I see."

"Might call me something of a hunter, too. But I'm not interested in the usual big game. Besides, even if I have captured most of my guests, they are guests. And are treated as such. I rather flatter myself that I've improved their lot. It's not easy, in times like these, to be a vampire or a werewolf."

I AGREED with him on *that*.

"Perhaps you're wondering just what impulse led me to the pursuit of this little hobby?"

"I am."

Margate giggled.

"Oh, it's silly enough, I suppose. At least to people who fancy themselves the practical, hard-headed sort. As a boy, I mooned around a lot over books. Mythology. Bulfinch. You know the stuff. I inherited money. There was no need to work. I inherited a certain amount of intelligence, too, I claim. Enough intelligence to avoid emulating the average career of the wealthy man of leisure. You know the stuff—blondes, polo, blondes, golf, blondes, horses, blondes, tennis." He giggled again. "But I do like blondes," he added.

"You might say I rebelled against certain so-called rational concepts of reality. I began to study myth-cultures. I convinced myself that certain deviations from the accepted norm existed in Nature. That the legends of superna-

tural presences and entities might conceivably rest on a basis of truth. That you can't sit back and say, 'There is no such thing as a werewolf,' for example, if you've never looked for one. Besides, psychopathology has only recently admitted the psychotic existence of werewolves, if not the physiological possibility.

"I knocked around the globe a bit in the yacht. Picked up Captain Hollis, here. A good man, the captain. Lost his eyes in my service. A maenad scratched them out, off the Dardanelles."

"She was a hussy, that one!" the captain boomed.

"We found a few things together, he and I. Things the hard-headed scientific boys never bothered to look for. They're always willing to go chasing off to nowhere and back to capture a reported new specimen of gorilla, or something, but you never hear of them getting up an expedition to actually track down a sea-serpent, for example. Dullards!"

"At any rate, you'll meet some of my—discoveries—later. At the moment, I am engaged on a little writing project of my own. Sort of combination of clinical case-histories and a revision of mythology. That's why my guests are here. I'm extracting their life histories."

Margate smiled amiably.

"I think you'll like it here, once

you get accustomed to things," he said. "There's a number of tasks for you to perform, of course. But if you humor my guests a bit you won't have any trouble. They're all goodhearted, if a little unusual."

A crash interrupted his monologue.

"The kitchen!" the captain muttered.

Indeed, the noise of falling crockery and silver resounded from the kitchen doorway.

Margate was on his feet. I followed him.

"Damn that Jory! How often have I told him not to change in the house? He's always doing that, and he always smashes the dishes!"

We stared into the kitchen.

Floundering amidst a welter of broken plates, a large wolf stared up at us with contrite eyes. The wolf had brown fur—like Jory's hair, only more of it. The wolf was panting a little, and its red tongue lolled.

As we watched, it rose to its paws and uttered a little yelp of embarrassment.

"Oh, Jory, you're so careless!" Margate sighed, shaking his head.

The wolf nuzzled against his leg.

"All right. But try to remember!"

I stared at the red eyes. Jory's eyes.

Now I was able to trace, not without a certain fascinated horror,

the human outlines inherent in the wolf body. The bony structure of the ribs. The peculiar adaptation of elbow to joint. The finger-like pattern of the paws. And the human cast of the lupine muzzle.

The werewolf turned and began to scratch patiently at the door.

Margate stared at me.

"Oh dear!" he whispered. "Oh dear!"

"What's the matter?"

He stepped to the wall and took down a harness and muzzle. Stooping, he adjusted them about the wolf's body and throat.

"I'm sorry," he told me. "But I'm afraid you'll have to take Jory outside. I can tell he wants to go."

He placed the end of the leash in my nerveless fingers and pushed me forward into the night. The wolf tugged me into darkness.

"Just once around the block," Margate cautioned.

So I did it. My first duty in the house of my new employer was to walk his pet werewolf around the block.

CHAPTER III

I SLEPT soundly that evening, in spite of it all. I could save my nightmares for when I was awake.

Margate met me at the break-

fast table. He was in bubbling spirits—as usual.

"The captain's left," he announced. "Got his maps and orders last night. Should be gone about six weeks, I estimate."

He chuckled to himself.

"If he succeeds this time, my collection will be complete."

"After something unusual?"

"Unusual is hardly the word! This one will really paralyze you! Hope he makes it all right."

"Isn't it a risky business for a blind man?"

"Riskier for a man with his eyes." Margate babbled on. "But finish your breakfast. I'm going to show you around."

I had hardly downed my coffee when Margate jumped up from the table, bursting with eagerness.

"Come on, come on!"

He led the way into the yard. We walked along a shaded gravel pathway leading to the rear of the house. Margate stooped midway.

"Jory's tracks," he muttered. "Didn't hear him come in last night. Oh well, he'll sleep until noon or later. And Simpkins won't be with us until sundown."

We proceeded, moving between ordered flower-beds.

"Warm, isn't it?" Margate commented. He paused in the shadow of a tree.

"It is hot." I rested my hand against the trunk.

"Get your hands off me!" commanded a voice.

I looked around. There was nothing to see.

"You heard me!" The voice was high, feminine; yet strangely muffled.

I stared again. As I did so, a branch descended and slapped my face.

"Fresh!"

Margate laughed.

"That's Myrtle," he explained. "In the tree. A hamadryad."

I wheeled and surveyed the tree. It looked quite ordinary to me.

"Tree nymph," Margate continued. "Don't mind her. Her bark is worse than her bite."

"That isn't funny," came the voice from the tree. "Who's the new fellow, Margate?"

"That's our new house man."

"Hmm. Not very polite, I must say."

I thought it best to turn and bow at the branches.

"Sorry if I offended you. As a matter of fact, I was merely admiring your limbs. That's a lovely trunk you have there."

This was the right approach. I could tell that. A peal of girlish laughter was my reward.

"Flatterer!"

"Not at all, I assure you."

"Margate," said Myrtle, softly. "I hate to say it, but I wish you'd

remember to tell Jory to keep away from me when—"

"Of course, Myrtle. He's just thoughtless, that's all. How are things otherwise?"

"Pretty fair."

"Your new friend here can climb a tree. I might have him shinny up you if you want to be pruned at any time."

I recalled that tree-climbing was one of my requisites listed by the employment man. Type C blood, fond of animals, a tree-climber — yes, it worked in, all right.

"I'd be glad to handle your limbs at any time," I offered.

Myrtle laughed.

"How you talk!" Her branches shook coyly.

Margate moved on down the path. I followed. Myrtle rustled coyly in farewell.

"Lovely girl," my employer remarked. "Often wonder what she looked like. The captain picked her up in the Carpathians. Had to fight off a gang of peasants when he transplanted her." He sighed reminiscently.

We walked down a graveled pathway through the garden which led to the door of a large, low structure. It resembled a stable or barn.

"Want you to meet Gerymanx," Margate explained, as we entered. He bustled in. I had to stoop in order to pass the doorway.

Gerymanx stood in a large stall. Or rather, a part of Gerymanx. Gerymanx was a horse, and since his back was turned toward me, the part I gazed upon hardly constituted a proper introduction.

"There he is," said Margate. "Nice looking, isn't he?" He thumbed at the portion of Gerymanx which was visible. "Ever see anything like it before?"

I had an answer for that one.

SUDDENLY, at the rear of the stall, a man raised his head and peered intently at us. He was a stranger, and a rather disreputable one. Tousle headed and unshaven, he bared prominent yellow teeth in a sly grin.

It rather disappointed me to find Margate employing such a raffish-looking fellow. I told him so, under my breath.

"Not much of a stable-boy," I commented.

"Stable-boy? That's no stable-boy, that's Gerymanx."

"But I thought you told me this—this thing—is Gerymanx," I protested, weakly indicating the protruding brown backside of the horse.

"So it is. But the head is also Gerymanx. Don't you understand, my boy? Gerymanx is a centaur."

He would be. I might have known it. But I could hardly control my confusion when the hu-

man head wheeled, the horse body pivoted, and Gerymanx trotted out of his stall to welcome us formally.

I am no judge of horseflesh, and certainly no judge of centaurflesh either, but I must admit Gerymanx was impressive. His horsebody glistened beautifully in the sunshine from the stable sky-light. His human torso, rising from the waist, was superbly muscled. I had always imagined centaurs to be somewhat shaggy. Gerymanx wasn't. He trotted forward, and upon our introduction, shook hands. He had to bend his elbows to do it, being considerably taller than myself.

"A pleasure," he boomed. "Mr. Margate here tells me you're quite a horseman. We must go for a ride together soon."

Margate beamed with pride. "Gerymanx is quite a pacer," he told me. "Four-gaited."

"Glad to get out again," the centaur went on. "No one has been around to exercise me but Dave, and he can't do anything but hang on. Thought I'd like to work out mornings and maybe enter the steeplechase this fall."

"He's very ambitious," Margate added. "Wants to race." He turned to the centaur. "How's the oat situation?"

"Pretty fair. You can tell this gentleman here what to do for me. I'd like to be curry-combed this

week, if you don't mind."

"Your mane wants clipping," Margate observed, critically.

"Guess it does." The centaur smiled coyly. "You know, Margate, I've been thinking of having my tail bobbed."

"Don't do anything hasty now," my host begged.

"But it's all the style. I was looking at the *Breeder's Annual* last night."

"We'll discuss that later," said Mr. Margate, curtly. "Right now we have to be moving on. I'm sure you two will get to be great friends."

He turned to me. "I must give you instructions on Gerymanx shortly. You'll take care of him as well as Myrtle and the rest."

We moved out of the stable as Gerymanx trotted back into his stall.

"Lunch time. Listen — I want you to call up the grocer in town and order a few items for me."

We marched back to the house.

"You understand, I can hardly allow tradespeople to get in here. You'll meet them at the gate, of course. But let's see now. We'll need a roast for ourselves — and some raw hamburger — about two pounds — a bottle of Lextron — that's Vitamin B extract for Mr. Simpkins — better get a bottle of Glover's Mange Cure for Jory — five pounds of halibut steak — and

then call the feed store and ask them to send up a bale of hay — a bottle of tabasco sauce—"

I used the hall phone.

"Afraid you're going to be in for a little heavy duty these days," Mr. Margate apologized. "What with the captain and Dave away. Why not run upstairs and take a shower before lunch? It might freshen you up a bit for the afternoon. I want to go over the notes for my book with you, if you don't mind. Run along now — I'll fix us a snack if Jory isn't around."

I ascended the stairs to my own quarters. I had quite a nice bedroom with bath attached. I noted that my things had arrived some time during the morning. Jory must have brought them up.

It was quiet in my room. Quiet, and normal. That's what I needed most. A touch of normalcy, after all this bewilderment.

I walked into the bathroom, reached around the shower curtains and turned on the water. Then I undressed, slowly. I had a cigarette — one of Margate's Turkish. I went back to the bath. I pulled aside the curtain, climbed in the tub.

"Hey!" said a voice.

I looked down.

THERE was a girl in the bathtub.

She was a very pretty girl. I

noticed that at once. She had a long oval face, high cheekbones, deep blue eyes, and long, curly hair.

I also observed that she would look good in a sweater, though at the moment she wasn't wearing any that I could notice. And I noticed.

"Hey," she repeated, staring up at me.

I just stood there. Because a second glance afforded me certain observations of a disturbing nature. She was a pretty girl with long hair, all right—but her hair was green. A vivid green. Most unusual color.

"What are you trying to do?" persisted the girl.

"I was just going to take a bath," I answered, not too brightly.

"Well don't stand there on one leg like a stork, then," she replied. "Come on in. The water's fine."

I didn't move, but I was taken aback.

"Who are you?" prattled the chatter box in the tub. "My but you're skinny, aren't you?"

It was a trifle disturbing — this criticism. What would you say if you walked into your bathroom and a strange girl in your tub made disparaging remarks about your physique?

I was still pondering the problem when a discreet cough sounded

from the doorway.

It was Margate.

He ignored me and strode toward the tub, staring down at the soapy water.

"So here you are, Trina," he accused. "At it again, eh? How did you ever get up here?"

"Jory carried me," answered the girl, defiantly. "I didn't think anyone would notice. Besides, I just wanted to use the bath salts."

"Well, you'll have to get out now. This is our new-house man. He wants a bath, I imagine. That is what you want, isn't it?" he added, turning to me for corroboration.

"Yes."

"Oh very well. If you will be a pig, and hog it all for yourself." Trina sulked. "Lift me out."

I hesitated.

"Come on."

I stooped and lifted. She was slippery. But that wasn't the reason I almost dropped her.

I was staring at her waist. At the green — oh, it might as well be admitted! Trina was a mermaid.

"Shame on you," Margate scolded. "I thought I told you not to leave your tank." He sighed. "What will our new house man think of us, I wonder? Jory changing in the kitchen and you sneaking into his tub."

"I just wanted bath salts," the mermaid wailed. "And a chance

to use this lovely mirror here to comb my hair." Her eyelids fluttered up at me coyly, like waving kelp. "Maybe you'll help me comb my hair?" she suggested.

"Not now!" Margate extended his arms. "Here, give her to me. Go ahead and bathe in peace."

He bore Trina from the room. A most attractive armful too. I bathed meditatively.

At the luncheon table, Margate confided in me.

"It's her French blood," he declared. "Trina's a Breton, you know. Found her off the coast of Brittany.

"She's the restless type, though. Wants to sneak out to bathing beaches, I suppose. Crazy about bath salts and perfumes. Guess she's lonesome. Used to a lot of oceanides and nereides around. To say nothing of sailors."

"I like her," I ventured. "I don't blame her for getting bored in a tank. It must be like living the life of a goldfish. Isn't there a swimming pool or something around here?"

"Say, that's an idea! You could dig her one! There in the garden. You know how to handle cement?"

"Guess I could manage."

"Jory will help," Margate promised. "Say, that's fine."

We finished our luncheon in high humor. After a smoke we adjourned to Margate's study.

It was more of a library than a study, and more of a museum than a library. The walls were lined with bookshelves. I scanned the titles with eager curiosity.

"Quite a collection you have here," I commented. "Lots of sorcery."

Margate gave me an earnest glance. "Just for reading purposes," he emphasized. "Never monkey with the stuff personally. Too dangerous."

I noted a glass bell jar on the side table. A long, thin bone rested on a cushion within. Margate marked my interest.

"Supposed to be a unicorn horn," he explained. "But I'm inclined to believe it's a fake. Anybody knows there are no such things as unicorns."

I RETURNED to the large center table and desk. In order to avoid resting my finger on a mummified head I brought my hand down on a large, dark brown bottle. Margate gasped.

"Careful there! Don't jiggle that bottle! Got a djinn in there."

I stepped back.

"Bought it from a sailor in Aden. Set me back a pretty penny. Don't know why I wanted it—I'm afraid to open the thing."

I stared into the brown, cloudy glass. I could see nothing. But when I lifted the bottle it gave

foirth a rustling sound — a most disconcerting noise to emanate from glass or liquid.

"Let me see, now," Margate began. He stooped over the desk drawers and began to draw forth sheafs of manuscript.

"Here's the case history of Mr. Simpkins," he muttered. "And the notes Jory is giving me. Cave stuff — archeological background from Gerymanx. What's this? Oh, the report of the Demonolatrical Society. 1946. Out of date."

He lifted his hands, eyebrows waggling in despair.

"You see? Everything's topsyturvy. Never get anything done this way. Need some system. A little order. Then I can get started again."

But somehow we didn't get at any filing system that afternoon. We sat down and got involved in a little discussion, during which my employer added a few scraps of information to my data on his life-work.

I learned that he had conducted this somewhat singular menage of his for about five years. Mr. Simpkins was his oldest guest; then Gerymanx, Myrtle, and Jory. Trina was really the latest acquisition.

They got along fairly well together, according to Margate. Of course he humored them. Kept them happy. And in return, they

afforded him diversion enough to recompense him for the sacrifice of a normal social life.

"Never go out," Margate told me. "Couldn't afford to, under the circumstances. Never invite guests, either. But the book is coming along, and it's well worth it. When I am finished I'll take my place alongside of Frazer and Ellis. What Darwin and Huxley did in their fields I will do in mine."

He seemed a simple soul, did Julius Margate. I felt a growing affection for the man.

"Only one complaint," he confided. "People are always trying to palm off fakes on me. Those things get around, you know. I've had side-show dealers trying to sell me freaks. And some unscrupulous dealers try to peddle their fakes — monstrosities that never existed. Missing links, and basilisks. One Irish rogue had the cheek to claim he could secure a leprechaun. Anyone with any sense knows there aren't things like that. I ask you, now, is that right?"

He didn't wait for an answer, but rose to his feet with a frown.

"Dear me! Almost supper time. Better dash out to the gate for those groceries. I'll route Jory out. He's in the kennel, most likely.

"On your way back," he called, "I think you'd better take a run down to the cellar. Fix the furnace. It'll be chilly tonight."

I left on my errand. After lugging up the groceries I made for the cellar stairs, descended.

It was dark down there. I struck three matches before I located the furnace in the gloom.

I found the coal, filled the hopper. It took some time. Little red shadows danced on the walls behind me as I got the fire glowing. It was cheerful, warm. I began to whistle.

Then I heard the sound.

The creaking, groaning sound from the corner.

And a rustling. A slow, crawling rustle. A slithering noise.

I lit a match, held it up in none too steady fingers.

Fire swept across a mound of churning earth. A mound in which a box was set—a long, white box. A box that opened. Opened in darkness, as two long arms rose silently, swiftly.

Something sat up. Something with a long white face.

With a sudden start, I recognized Mr. Simpkins.

"You!" I gasped.

"Hello." Simpkins rose. The earth fell from his black coat. He stretched himself and yawned.

"What time is it? Forgot to set the alarm clock again."

I stared down at the coffin from which he had emerged.

The vampire stood beside me. "Pretty bad, isn't it?" he commen-

ted.

I shuddered in complete agreement. "Know what I'm going to do, my friend?" he asked.

"N—no."

"I am going to make our host purchase a new coffin for me. It's the least he can do to repay me for that scurvy trick of removing my teeth."

I nodded numbly.

"Since Dave is gone, you shall have to accompany me," he continued. "We can go tonight, I suppose."

"Go—where?"

"Why to the undertaking parlor, of course. Where else would you buy yourself a coffin?"

"I won't do it," I declared.

And that settled that.

After supper Mr. Simpkins and I went out to buy him a new coffin.

CHAPTER IV

JASON HARRIS operated one of the most thriving mortuary chapels in the city. Business was never dead. Mr. Harris himself was always on hand to welcome a fresh customer. That's the only way he liked his customers—fresh.

But he didn't like us.

I could tell that almost as soon as Mr. Simpkins and I entered his outer display rooms.

It had been a struggle to drag me this far. Both Mr. Simpkins and

Mr. Margate had argued with me — pointing out that I was the only one who could drive the vampire down, and that night was the only opportunity Simpkins had of going out to make a personal selection. They clinched the argument by reminding me that I was, after all, an employee. And an employee must be obedient.

Now I wanted to get the whole business over with, quickly and quietly. So when Jason Harris moved forward to greet us, I lost no time.

"My friend and I should like to purchase a coffin," I began.

"Very well." Mr. Harris assumed a mask of sympathy. "Might I inquire as to the nature of the bereavement in the family?"

Mr. Simpkins stepped out. "Never mind that. Just show us around this box factory of yours and we'll make our own selection."

"Of course." Somewhat disconcerted by the callousness of the request, Harris led us over to an imposing bronze casket.

"Here is one of our latest models," he began. "I want you to note the dignity of its outlines, the solidity of its construction, the—"

"What about a mattress?" inquired Mr. Simpkins, eagerly. "Has it got a mattress?"

"A mattress can be secured," Harris assured him. "But I must ask you to observe this special fea-

ture — the method whereby the sealed casket is made airtight."

"Airtight? Nothing doing," Simpkins snapped. "How do you expect a man to breathe in an airtight coffin? Why he'd strangle to death!"

"But the deceased does not breathe—"

"How do you know? You ever been deceased? Come to think of it you do look a little dead on your feet."

Mr. Harris was indeed quite pale.

"I don't seem to understand you gentlemen," he muttered.

"We just want to buy a coffin, that's all. For a body."

"What sort of body?" Mr. Harris persisted.

"Why no body in particular. Just any body."

The mortician looked agitated. "You aren't by any chance planning a murder? You're not gangsters, I hope?"

"Of course not." Mr. Simpkins gave out with a laugh that was meant to be reassuring. It wasn't. "Say, I heard a good one about an undertaker who specialized in gangsters funerals. His motto was 'Don't Put All Your Yeggs in One Casket.' Good eh?"

Mr. Harris didn't think so. He looked distressed. I took advantage of his confusion to pull the vampire over toward a small modest-appearing gray box.

"What about this?" I suggested.

"Not bad," Simpkins commented.

"Streamlined. And plush lining. Always like a plush lining."

"This is a very select model," Harris assured us. "One of our most popular styles this season."

"Never mind the sales build-up," said Simpkins. "I'll just try it out for myself."

Lifting the lid, he climbed into the coffin and lay down.

"Very comfortable," he grunted. "Lots of leg room."

This statement didn't please the undertaker either. He kept staring at Mr. Simpkins with a rapt expression, and his teeth began to chatter like a bunch of women around a Gin Rummy game.

"This coffin isn't for you!" he exclaimed.

"Of course it is. I always pick out my own coffins when I get the chance."

"Most people don't get a chance," Harris was forced to observe.

"Not me. I'm different. I've picked out five coffins in my time. Outlasted them all." Without waiting to observe the reaction to this last statement, Mr. Simpkins suddenly banged the lid shut. A moment later he pushed it up again.

"Have to oil this lid," he complained. "I might want to get out in a hurry some time. You know how it is."

"NO, I don't," the undertaker confessed. "I don't want to know how it is, either. You two get out of here. You are crazy."

"A fine way for a mortician to talk to a customer," Simpkins bridled. "All right. I don't want your old box anyway. It's lousy. Why I would be ashamed to be found dead in one of your coffins."

He rose. "Come on," he told me. "We'll try another joint down the street where the service is better. I probably can make a deal on a trade-in of the old casket, too."

Mr. Harris forced a smile.

"Don't be hasty," he coaxed. "It's just that I didn't seem to understand. But I guess I do now. You want to purchase this coffin to sleep in, is that it?"

"Of course," said Mr. Simpkins, in a disgusted voice. "What would you do in a coffin?"

"Very little," the mortician assured him. "But, if I might inquire, why don't you purchase a bed?"

"Beds? Bah! The dirt gets onto the sheets," Simpkins complained. "And the light comes in, too."

"You sleep during the day?"

"That's right. I want something that's dark. Something to keep out the dirt. To say nothing of the worms."

"You have worms?" asked Mr. Harris in spite of himself.

"I'll say I have worms," answered the vampire.

"Dyspepsia is my trouble," the undertaker confessed.

"Maybe a coffin would help you, too."

"Never thought of it. Quiet in there, isn't it?"

"Very quiet. And think of the plush lining—all that satin and stuff!"

"Interesting idea, if a little morbid."

"Beds are expensive," the vampire continued. "And linen is high, too. I should think, with all these swell boxes lying around, you'd just hop into one for forty winks now and then."

Harris scratched his head.

"I'd have to talk it over with my wife first," he mused.

"Haven't you got any of these double caskets? The big jobs?"

"Yes. It might work out at that."

"Just a thought, friend. By the way—guess we'll take this one."

Harris resumed his professional interest. He quoted a price. I paid him.

"Do you want this delivered?" he asked.

"I'll take it with me," Simpkins responded. He grabbed one end of the casket and I took the other.

Harris followed us to the door. "But this is all so unusual — I'm a little confused. You really want to get into this coffin?"

"Sure as I'm alive," Simpkins answered. Harris sighed deeply.

"Well, it's your own funeral."

"Not bad!" Simpkins chuckled. "And don't forget what I told you. Try a casket yourself for sleeping purposes. I'd love to see you in a coffin."

The undertaker shuddered visibly.

"Oh, gentlemen," he called, as we opened the door. "Just one thing more. It's customary to have the name and address when anyone purchases a casket."

Simpkins turned. Look me up out at Everest Cemetery," he suggested, maliciously. "I've got a nice grave out there."

Harris trembled.

"Drop in some time," Simpkins added.

As we closed the door, the undertaker turned and ran back into his shop. His shoulders heaved.

"Now see what you did," I accused, as we climbed into the car. "He probably won't be able to work for a week now."

Mr. Simpkins was contrite.

"I was only trying to be funny," he apologized. "Besides let him close up the funeral parlor if he wants to. Business is probably dead anyway."

I shivered as we drove off. Vampires I could learn to stand—but puns, never. If Mr. Simpkins didn't behave, he'd find some worms on his pillow one of these days.

THE ensuing days were unexpectedly pleasant. Life quickly fell into a routine.

In the morning I usually went out to the stables and brought Gerymanx his oats and hay. Then I turned the hose on Myrtle. Afternoons I spent with Margate, trying to recopy his disordered notes and straighten out his reference sources in some kind of filing system.

At times I took Jory for a walk in the evening. Every Saturday night it was my duty to give him a bath. During the third week I had the rather unpleasant duty of shaving him, but on the whole I managed excellently.

At the time of the full moon I called up town and ordered a pair of motorcycle goggles. These fitted over his eyes more comfortably than the usual dark glasses, and he passed through the difficult days with a minimum of howling. Margate's system seemed to keep his lycanthropic instincts well under control.

Within a few weeks I had Mr. Margate's household running smoothly. My work in his study came to an end. He was able to sit down with his book material well organized. I saw little of him, these days—he spent most of his time taking new notes. Jory's recital occupied his immediate attention. Jory being rather stupid and illiterate, it was a difficult task to

extract coherent information from him. But Margate persevered.

My first feeling of strangeness was almost completely dissipated. One can become adjusted to almost anything through constant familiarity.

I no longer found it shocking when Jory assumed his lupine form before my eyes. The spectacle of Mr. Simpkins snoring in his cellar coffin did not alarm me. Myrtle's muffled voice from the tree-trunk became as natural a manifestation as the rustling from the branches of surrounding elms. Gerymanx was no bother at all. He read his racing form bragged heroically of his racing abilities, and had latterly become absorbed in a system of physical culture exercises he was taking through the mails.

Perhaps not visiting in town did it. Isolation inured me to the unusual. My duties were light, the food was excellent, and the hours passed swiftly.

Besides, there was Trina.

I got her out of that cellar tank in no time.

During the second week I began to dig the swimming pool. I worked alone, but it was a steady pace that I set for myself. Another week and I had the concrete laid. In the fifth week of my stay the pool was completed.

Trina didn't know, of course. I planned it as a surprise for her,

with Margate's connivance.

When I carried her up from the basement she thought I was smuggling her in for a go at the bath salts—a frequent practice of mine which I might as well admit. We had become very friendly, Trina and I. After all, I'm broadminded enough to overlook little details like that emerald hair.

I took her out that afternoon and brought her to the pool.

At first she couldn't speak.

"Oooooooh!" she squealed. Tenderly, I threw her into the water. She splashed gaily. In a moment she swam over and put her arms around my neck.

"It's wonderful!" she whispered, and kissed me. It was the first time but not the last. I found it very nice. A mermaid's kiss is moist, and a little salty, but very interesting.

I'd built a little rockpile in the center of the pool. She sunned herself like a Lorelei, her livid curls shimmering in the breeze, the radiance of her scales glistening against the water. Her long, delicate fingers, with just the fascinating suggestion of a web at the palm, beckoned to me. I went in the house and borrowed a pair of Margate's swimming trunks to join her.

AFTER that time went very swiftly indeed. I spent hours out there on the rocks with her.

We'd swim awhile and sun awhile. She used to sing me some old Breton sea ballads in a piquant Flemish accent. Some of them were slightly bawdy, I suppose. I don't understand French very well.

Trina was happy for the first time in her life since she had been ensnared in Captain Hollis' nets.

"I've been like a fish out of water," she confessed to me. "It's like coming home again. Now, if I only had a few sailors—"

I put a stop to that talk in short order. Her weakness for seafaring men was really deplorable. But mermaids are like that, I suppose.

My fondest memories are those of the moonlight bathing parties. She and I in a world of silver water, gliding along under the moon. And afterwards we'd sit on the edge of the pool, roasting hot dogs or toasting marshmallows over a little fire. It was beautiful while it lasted.

Then came the well-remembered day. Along in the seventh week it was.

Margate met me at the breakfast table with a worried frown.

"What's the matter? Still stuck on that Jory memorandum?" I asked. "That part about the relation of the moon-flower to the anthropomorphic tendencies?"

"No, it's not that," Mr. Margate answered. He ran his hand through his bristling gray crop. "It's Captain Hollis and Dave. They're

nearly two weeks late. Haven't had a word—not a cablegram."

"It's nothing," I consoled him.

"Perhaps. But they're on a dangerous errand."

It wasn't the first time Margate had told me that. He was constantly hinting but never revealing the nature of this quest.

"I wish you'd tell me," I said. "Maybe I could help."

"There's no way of helping," he answered. "Maybe I'm just a fool for planning this anyway. What good will it be if they are successful? I can't look and I can't listen. Never even see or hear what I get. Have to take my notes second-hand."

I COULDN'T make head or tail out of this recital.

"In case they do get back," Margate continued, "I'd better have you clear out the back room in the cellar. The big one. I've ordered sheet metal to cover the door. It's fairly soundproof. Just clear out the old furniture and leave the place vacant. We won't need any pen, or any food either, I don't suppose."

He sighed.

"The crew is reliable, though; Hollis has used the men before. They have their orders, but Hollis has to make the actual capture, of course. Dangerous business. Oh well, we'll just have to wait and

see. Or rather, wait and not see."

Curiosity gnawed within me. I opened my mouth. But Margate rose and cut me off.

"Say! I just remembered—are you a blacksmith?"

"No. Can't say that I am."

His face fell. "Too bad. Knew I'd forgotten something when I listed your requirements."

"What's the matter?"

"It's Gerymanx. He needs to be shod."

"Oh."

"Didn't he mention that his hooves hurt him?"

"Come to think of it, he said something of the sort to me yesterday. I assumed it was just a minor complaint."

"No, he needs shoes badly. And he'd like a manicure, I suppose." Margate sighed. "Tell you what you have to do. Take the small truck into town and see the blacksmith there. I've got the address. Used to ride him down at night myself."

"But you'd better go. I want to stick around here in case Captain Hollis shows up."

"You mean I put the centaur in the back of the truck and haul it to a blacksmith shop?"

"It's all right. I've bribed this fellow heavily. Business being what it is in the smithy line these days, he keeps his mouth shut."

"But what about traveling on the

road?"

"Oh, if you use the county truck you shouldn't have any trouble. Not much traffic."

"All right."

"Better get started." Margate scribbled down an address and gave me some money. I turned.

"Be careful now," he warned me. "And watch Gerymanx. He's a wild one when he gets loose. Got ambitions, he has. And he's too friendly. Keep him out of mischief and when he gets through bring him right back. Whatever you do, don't let him get into Droopy's Tavern next door. He's fond of the grape. We caught him that way, while he was drunk."

I hurried down the path. Trina called out to me from the pool.

"Coming in for a swim, dear?"

"Can't make it. Got to hurry into town." I stopped and gave her a kiss. "See you later."

She flipped her tail at me saucily and turned away.

Gerymanx was at the stable door.

"Margate says you're taking me in for a pedicure," he greeted me.

"That's right."

"You want a saddle?"

"No. You're coming in on the truck. And no monkey business either," I warned.

The centaur's face fell. "That's too bad. I thought we might have a little canter around the park before we went to the smith's."

"Nothing doing. Can't afford to attract any attention."

"Oh, all right," Gerymanx sulked. "Get the truck."

I pulled it out of the garage. It was a small job, but I was grateful for the enclosed sides on the compartment. They completely hid Gerymanx's astonishing body from view. Only his tousled head was visible above the railing.

"Take it easy," he called out.

I took it easy. Very easy. Every time we passed a car on the highway I slowed down and I did my best to avoid jolting my peculiar passenger. It was almost lunchtime when we pulled up at the old brick smithy on the outskirts of town.

I backed the truck up to the door and walked inside.

THE blacksmith, who by the most appropriate coincidence was named Smith, came to the door. He was a broad shouldered man with a bald head and a ruddy complexion.

"I've got a job for you," I began, hesitantly. "Gentleman in back there wants to be shod."

Smith cocked his head at Gerymanx, then smiled.

"Oh—you're from Mr. Margate. I understand. Bring him inside, there's nobody around."

I led Gerymanx down the loading platform and hurried him into

the stables.

"Make it snappy will you?" I requested, nervously.

"Take about an hour," Smith told me. "Why not go next door and have a bite of lunch?"

It seemed like a sound suggestion. I entered Droopy's Tavern and sat down.

Mr. Droopy—if that was his name—proved to be a short little man with red hair and a permanently bored expression on his unshaven features.

"Whatsa gonna be?" he asked.

I ordered a sandwich and a glass of beer. The sandwich was liberally salted. I had a second glass of beer. It must have been salted too, because my thirst increased. I had a third glass, a fourth.

All this time I could hear a merry clanging from the smithy next door. Smith was at work.

The ponding ceased abruptly. Smith came in through a side door with a pail.

"How's it going?" I asked.

"Pretty hot work," he told me. He turned to the bar. "Hey, Droopy—fill this up."

Droopy took the pail over to the tap.

Smith went out again. In a few moments the clanging increased. Suddenly it halted once more. Smith re-entered with the empty pail.

"Very hot work," he explained.

"Droopy—fill this up."

Again he went out. Again the clanging rose. And in a remarkably short time, Smith walked heavily in with his bucket.

"Stremely hot," he mumbled. "Fill 'er up, Droop."

I watched Droopy fill the large pail. I ordered another beer myself. Smith stumbled out. More clanging. Then silence.

Smith wobbled through the door.

"Heat's terrific," he hiccupped. "Gotta fill thish up, Droop, ol' pal."

He went out. I listened intently. The clanging began again. But this time it held a peculiar cadence. A familiar cadence.

"Da-da- da-da dec-da, de-da de-da, de-da-da.

Where had I heard *this* before?

I made for the side door and slipped into the smithy.

Gerymanx squatted on his haunches beside the blacksmith, whose left arm was locked around his neck. Both centaur and smithy held a hammer in their free hands. As I watched, they tapped merrily away on the anvil. Their raucous voices rose in a sour blending of the *Anvil Chorus*. The empty bucket, inverted, was perched on Gerymanx's shaggy head.

"Hello, pal!" the centaur greeted me. I glared. "What is the meaning of this—this horseplay?"

Gerymanx wobbled to his feet.

"Wanna nother drink of beer!"

he insisted. "Feet all shod. Now I wanna celebrate."

"Gerymanx!" I yelled. "Come back here!"

But it was too late. The centaur trotted unsteadily through the side door and into Droopy's Tavern.

He was up at the bar before the red-headed proprietor looked at him. From the waist up, it was a naked man who stared at the bartender and shouted, "Shoot the soup to me, Droop!"

"Where's your clothes?" Droopy demanded.

"I'm masquerading," the centaur temporized. I tugged at his elbow.

"Come on, get out of here." I whispered.

"I don't serve no naked persons," Droopy declared. He stepped around the bar, then fell back. His eyes took in the horse body.

"Gawd!" he breathed.

Gerymanx turned what was meant to be a reassuring smile on the bartender.

"Told you I was masquerading, didn't I?" he explained.

"Well, I don't like it." Droopy turned to me. "Get the blazes outta my joint," he demanded. "And take this horse's— whatever it is—with you!"

It was an ill-chosen moment for the entry of another couple. They lurched into the tavern; a tall, flashily-dressed man and an ob-

viously befuddled woman. They stared incredulously at Gerymanx.

"Holy Moses!" muttered the man. "Do you see what I see?"

"Gawd, Harry, it's a mounted policeman." The woman peered tip-sily at the centaur.

"What'd he do with his clothes?"

"And where's his legs?" The man quavered. "He's a horse!"

Gerymanx wheeled, offended. "Who you think you're talking to?" he bridled.

"A talking horse," the woman amended. "Harry, we better lay off the stuff for awhile."

"Lay off me, that's what you should do." Gerymanx tried to prance and stumbled unsteadily. His hooves clattered against a cuspidor.

"I bet his mother was frightened by a merry-go-round," the woman continued.

"Oooh—look out!"

FOR Droopy had rounded the bar, bearing a baseball bat. He bore down on Gerymanx with an oath.

"I'll learn ya to horse around in my dump," he grated. "What you think this is, a livery stable?" He lifted his bat menacingly.

Gerymanx wheeled. His forefeet rose. Droopy sailed over the bar. With an inhuman neigh, the centaur dashed forward. His charge carried him through the door. I

raced after him.

In his drunken fury, the centaur careened into the street. By some unfortunate mischance a milk-wagon was standing beside our truck. The mare between the shafts looked up, startled.

At the sight of Gerymanx she neighed coyly. A slow blush spread over her equine cheeks. Gerymanx whinnied. Suddenly the mare's eyes gave a flicker of apprehension as they rested on the centaur's human torso. With a shrill, indignant squeal she dashed forward, carrying the wagon with her. There was a grinding crash as the wagon tipped sideways—right into our truck.

At the same moment Droopy emerged from the tavern. Up the street the milkman dropped his bottle-rack with a clatter and started to run our way.

"Now you've done it," I panted. "Wrecked the truck, too!"

"Get on my back," Gerymanx mumbled. The shock had sobered him. "We'll make a run for it."

I mounted hastily.

"Hang on to my neck."

I hung.

"Here we go."

We went.

The centaur's hooves struck sparks from the brick as he raced down the street. I clung to him for dear life.

"Wheel!" he yelled. "This is more like it!"

A glance showed me that our pursuers were gathered in a knot around the milk wagon and truck.

"What a mess," I groaned. "How'll we ever get back?"

"I'll carry you."

"On top of the load you're carrying already?"

Gerymanx laughed.

"I feel great," he snorted over his shoulder. "Great. Let's go annoy some street cleaners."

"We're going home. Right now."

"Oh, don't be a wet blanket! I want to have fun. Let's go down to Saratoga. Maybe you could enter me in a race."

I allowed this revolting suggestion to go unanswered.

"Take me home," I commanded.

"But—"

"Listen, Gerymanx," I said, slowly. "You've got a pretty soft berth there at Margate's, and you know it. If you don't behave, I'll fix you."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell Margate to sell you to an ice dealer. Then you'll have to pull a wagon all day long, and yell, 'Ice for sale' into the bargain."

Gerymanx's pace slackened.

"All right," he grumbled. "All right."

"Stick to the side road now," I cautioned.

He did. It was a slow trip. We hid out behind billboards whenever I spotted a car ahead or behind us.

It was almost twilight when we cantered through the gate and up the drive.

"That's about enough excitement for one day," I sighed.

But—

CHAPTER VI

"**C**OME right in!" Margate urged, standing on the steps. He waved his arms expansively.

"Me too?" Gerymanx asked.

"Of course. Wouldn't be a party without you."

"But I'll track up the carpet—"

"Track away! We're going to celebrate tonight."

"What is all this?" I inquired.

Margate's flushed little face held a slightly tipsy grin.

"Great news! Captain Hollis is back, and the trip's a success."

"Fine. Where is he?"

"He called from the yacht basin. He's hired a truck and he ought to be up in few hours."

"I'm anxious to see what he's got."

"You wouldn't be if you knew what it was." Margate snickered. "But come on, let's go inside and have a drink. I'm in the mood."

Gerymanx clattered after Margate and I followed.

The house was brilliantly illuminated. Margate was following its example. I found all the guests in the parlor. Trina sat in a wash tub.

Mr. Simpkins was up and about. Jory, in his more or less human form, was busily mixing drinks.

"Success!" Margate proposed, passing glasses to the centaur and myself.

"How about some supper?" I suggested.

"Help yourself." Margate indicated a row of bottles.

I shrugged. He was too far gone to argue with. I sat down next to Trina and tried to get into the spirit of things.

I didn't succeed. Perhaps they were all too far ahead of me. Perhaps it was instinctive premonition. Maybe it was just the rotten sandwich I'd had at the tavern. Whatever it was, I was the skeleton at the feast. I couldn't get in the mood at all.

When Gerymanx began riding Mr. Simpkins around on his back I regarded it as so much horse-play. Trina, noticing my dour face, turned away and began to flutter her eyelashes at Margate.

Jory, who had been taking a drink for himself every time he mixed for anyone else, soon lost all control. He charged right in front of us, and began running around the room on his paws. Everyone seemed to get a great kick out of the spectacle, but it gave me the chills.

Margate was maudlinly solicitous. "Whassa matter?" he demanded.

"Come on, have a drink."

"No thanks."

"All right. Spoil the party. Go ahead."

I forced a smile. "I'm pretty tired. Think I'll hit the hay."

"Whassat? Aren't you gonna wait up to see the nice new specimen Captain Hollis' gonna bring to the party? No welcoming committee?"

"I guess not."

"All right, then." Margate shrugged, and nearly fell over. "Get me bucket full of whiskey," he called. Gerymanx trotted over.

"Bucket of whiskey? What for?"

"Myrtle isn't here. Gonna take it out and splash it all over her roots."

That was enough for me. I went upstairs to my room and climbed in bed.

Downstairs I could hear the murmurs from the parlor. The party was getting wild. I didn't like it. For the first time I was really ready to consider my situation. After all, this sort of thing couldn't go on forever. Trina was a nice girl, but you don't walk up the aisle with a mermaid. Mr. Simpkins was very nice, for a vampire, and Jory was an amiable enough werewolf. But we'd never be close friends. And being jockey to a centaur isn't exactly a recommendation to future employers. A man is known by the company he keeps.

If this kept up, people would soon be pointing their finger at me for an incubus, or something.

I'd better have a talk with Margate soon, I decided. Yes, Margate would have to let me go. I was a little worried about him, anyway. It was hard to say what new monstrosity Hollis was bringing—but it would complicate matters. All this secrecy, and the special room in the cellar, now; this meant something pretty outlandish.

And there was Margate, whooping it up downstairs. Happy as a kid with a new toy. And just as irresponsible. Irresponsible! That was it. That's what the matter was with the whole crew. They couldn't cope with life. They needed a nursemaid. Being fantasies, they weren't able to face realities.

Oh well, In the morning, now—I fell asleep.

I HAD the damnedest dream. It seemed to me that something sneaked into my room. It had Trina's hair and Jory's face, and it lumbered along on four hooves like Gerymanx. Somehow I got the idea that it had Mr. Simpkin's missing teeth and it wanted to bite me. All the while it came closer it was laughing like Margate himself. I tried to move, but couldn't. It squatted right on top of me and grabbed at my throat. Its mouth opened.

I woke up.

Strong hands were closing around my neck.

"What the—"

The hands relaxed.

"Wake up!" boomed a voice. It was Captain Hollis.

"How'd you get here?"

"I made it." The blind man was panting. "I had to get you. Come on."

I sat up. "What's the matter?" I yawned. "When did you get in?"

"About half an hour ago. Around midnight. But never mind. You've got to help me get them out! You've got to. You're the only one left."

"Where's Dave?"

"Dave's—gone."

"What do you mean?"

"When we captured it. He got bit. Buried him at sea." The captain's hurried tones reached me as he jostled me toward the door.

"Tell me what happened," I muttered, as we went down the hall. "Where is everybody?"

"They're in the cellar. With it."

"With what?"

"Don't ask questions. That's what finished them. They were sitting around drunk when I got in. I carried it into the cellar in a packing crate. But I passed Myrtle, and she's gone too."

"I don't understand."

We moved across the deserted parlor. I snapped on lights as we

went. Hollis came after me, cane tapping.

"Don't try to understand," he whispered. "I couldn't stop them. They had to take a peek. Margate forgot everything. Said he wasn't afraid, dammit, and it was his after all. The whole crew made for the cellar."

"Come on." I went on through the kitchen. "They're all down there?"

"Yes."

"But what happened to them? What's the matter? What must I do?"

"Try and get them out. Think of a way."

"What's that?"

I flattened myself against the wall of the dark staircase. A figure padded through the level below.

"Where?"

"Listen—footsteps."

"Jory. I know those paws."

It was Jory. The wolf was slinking down the cellar corridor.

"Jory—wait!" I called. He didn't look around.

We followed.

The wolf made straight for the door at the end of the hall. The metal-covered door. It stood ajar. His muzzle forced it wider. The gray body moved in.

"Stop—" Hollis began.

I heard a howl. Just one howl. A howl that rose, and then froze in midair on its highest quaver. After

that, silence.

"It got him," Hollis whispered.

I moved forward.

Hollis clutched my arm. "Wait. Don't go in there."

"But you say they're all in there. You want me to get them out with you."

"I know. But you mustn't go in now. Not like that."

I faced the doorway. "Quit talking riddles. I'm going in."

Hollis held me.

I began to stare at the slight opening where the door hung ajar. It was dark beyond, but not so dark. A sort of subdued light filtered through. A light that didn't dissipate the darkness, but seemed to be a part of it. A stronger part.

IT WAS a violet, but sharper than a distinct color. Radiant. Like the reflection of a million Christmas tree ornaments. Gaudy. Alluring.

Then I felt it. The urge to enter. I wanted to see that light. It was like the ray emanating from a great jewel.

I brushed the captain's hand away.

"Let me go." I muttered. "I want to go on."

Wriggling from his grasp. I darted forward. I opened the door.

With a grunt, Hollis lunged. His fist caught me in the eye. I reeled back. His other fist lashed out. I

stumbled, my hands covering my face.

"What in blazes—"

I reeled, steadied myself, took my hands away. Darkness.

"Hollis, you fool—you've blacked my eyes for me!"

"I know. Now go in!"

I groped my way through the door. He followed.

We stood in darkness. Two blind men, in a room filled with a violet light.

"Where are we?"

I groped along the wall. The room was silent. Too silent. "Jory! Trina! Where are you?" I whispered. "Margate!" No answer. I stumbled forward, hands outstretched.

I touched something. Something cold. My hands flew back. But there was no sound, no movement. I stretched my fingers forward once more. Again they rested on a cold surface. A hard surface.

I ran them along, tracing an all too familiar outline. Hair. A face. Trina's hair and face. But hard and cold. Cold as—marble.

"She's stonel!"

"Of course. They're all stone. All of them."

I moved on. Another figure. I almost collided with it. It was a standing man. Bristly hair.

"Margate."

Hollis sighed behind me.

"That's why we both had to

come in, dammit. To lift them out. They're too heavy."

"But Hollis—what is it? What did this?"

"The thing," the captain answered.

My fingers fumbled toward a third figure.

"What thing?" I asked.

My fingers came to rest, and found the answer.

This surface was cold too, but it wasn't motionless. My hands moved over a long neck; and then up into an icy tangle. Hair.

But the hair moved, too. It was thick, horribly thick, in solid coils. Coils that suddenly came to life, writhing forth with a rustling.

Then I heard the hissing, felt the hair coiling around my wrist, jerked my hand away in frantic haste.

"Serpents!" I muttered.

"Get back!" Hollis yelled. "It's the thing—that damned Gorgon—the Medusa!"

As the hissing rose to a shrill crescendo I turned and ran blindly out of the cellar room.

CHAPTER VII

THAT'S the way it was.

It must have been over an hour before Hollis argued me into going back with him to get them out. I consented, finally, and we went to work.

They must have weighed at least

three hundred pounds apiece. Gerymanx we had to slide across the floor—too heavy to lift. It was all we could do to keep him from chipping.

Two blind men, carrying statues. We made it, though. Until at last there was only the hissing thing.

We locked the door on it. It couldn't walk, of course. I wanted to burn the place, but it would cause trouble later on.

Hollis and I had a long talk. He wouldn't tell me much more about his voyage. Or about the charts and directions Margate gave him. I know he found it somewhere close to Crete, and that's all. He had to go into the cave alone—being blind, it couldn't harm him. It was after he had it out that Dave reached into the sack and one of the snakes bit him.

I shuddered over my own narrow escape when I heard that.

"Poor Dave," Hollis grunted. "Mebbe it was just as well. Boss had a later job for him. Going after one of these sirens—that's what you call them. Because he was deaf and couldn't hear it."

He wouldn't tell me anymore.

So there we were.

"We'll have to get some sleep," Hollis told me. "Then we can figure something out."

But in the morning there was nothing figured out. I could see a little, though my eyes were puffy

and swollen. I got another nasty shock when I looked at the statues we dragged out.

Usually I admire life-like work, but these things were too damned life-like to suit me. Or to suit themselves, I suppose. Trina was lovely, though. It broke my heart to look at her. And Gerymanx looked quite imposing. Margate had one hand stuck out straight, as though to steady himself. Jory and Mr. Simpkins were both caught in mid-howl. Their mouths were still open.

"Now what do we do?" Hollis groaned. "We can't go away and leave that Medusa thing down there alive."

"Why leave it alive?" I asked. "We can kill it."

He laughed sarcastically.

"That's what you think," he told me. "It won't die."

"But Perseus killed one."

"Who?"

"A Greek warrior. He had some kind of sword—"

"Baloney. It's still alive, ain't it? This Percy-what's-his-name must have been kidding somebody along."

"Never thought of that."

"Well, think of it, then. I know it won't die. Because I tried it myself."

"You did?"

"Sure. After it got Dave. I pumped six shots into the thing."

"You didn't!"

"You bet I did, dammit. And on

the voyage back—two of the boys blundered onto it down in the cabin. Snoopers. It got them both. After that the rest went to work. The cook took a knife to it, from the rear. No result. Except that it turned around. I cooked the rest of the trip."

"It won't die, huh?"

"That's right."

This was a prettier problem than I'd expected. I looked at the stone faces around me. No solution there. But there must be a solution. I couldn't run off and leave that thing down in the cellar. Somebody would investigate sooner or later. And then—more statues.

"I'm going down there again."

"Oh, no you don't. You can see now." I'd forgotten *that* little detail. I *could* see. I stared at my puffy eyes in the mirror.

Then I got it.

"Wait for me. I've found the way out."

"Not me. I'm heading for that yacht, and I'm not coming back."

"But Captain—"

He tapped off. I was left alone.

I acted fast. I found what I was looking for and went downstairs.

It was hard work unlocking the cellar door. It was harder work to nerve myself up to going in. The violet light shed its evil radiance through the chink of the keyhole.

But there was no choice. I opened the door and walked in.

The Medusa was against the wall in the center of the room. Alone, in Gorgonic glory. I heard the rustling whisper of the coiled tresses.

It didn't stop me.

I walked forward, holding the object I'd brought right squarely in front of my face. It was a shield.

"Hey!" I called.

The Gorgon wouldn't understand English. But this didn't matter. Just so long as I attracted attention.

"Hey—look!"

I was almost on top of it. But it looked. It must have looked.

Because I heard the damndest hissing shriek that ever issued from the lips of nightmare. Whether it was the Gorgon or the serpents in its hair I don't know.

That wail rose up as the Gorgon stared, and then there was silence.

After that, I stuck out my hand. I felt the cold face. The cold *stony* face.

It had worked.

I dropped the object I was holding. It shattered there on the floor. But I didn't need it any more. Nor Perseus' sword.

I'd killed the Gorgon in the only possible way. I turned it to stone by showing it its own face in the mirror. So—

THERE it is. I've got two choices now. I can go back to the employment agency and try to

get another job. Something quiet and peaceful, like ditch-digging or assembly work in a boiler plant.

Or I could stay here and take care of my statues. I smashed the Medusa without looking at it. Used a crowbar. The others I have upstairs.

Margate has no relatives, so I might as well make myself at home. Let's see now—Trina would look good decorating the pool. Gerymanx would do for the foot of the staircase. I could make a gallery with Margate and Simpkins. As for Jory—I've got just the place for Jory.

I think that's the best solution, after all. Of course, I'll never touch anything that Margate dabbled in.

Which reminds me. That bottle, with the *djinn* inside. Maybe I can get rid of that, too.

CHAPTER VIII

AFTER a few days I stopped fingering bottles and began to drink from them. For Margate had a stock of fine liquor in his cellar, right next to the coffin that once housed Mr. Simpkins, the vampire.

Who can blame me? I was so lonely! Lonely for a sight of my unusual friends. I used to brush the statues every day with loving care. Particularly the statue of Trina the mermaid. Ah, there was a girl! I sighed when I thought of

her, and the wonderful times we'd spent together. She and I would sit in the magic moonlight and I would toss her a fish. The sight of her piquant face as she twisted her neck and caught the fish in her mouth—it haunted me with wistful poignancy.

A man can stand only so much of such moon-drenched memories. I had to do something.

Of course, I could have left the mansion and sought a job elsewhere. But if I went away, who would brush the dust from the faces of my stone friends? Into what unsympathetic hands would I entrust the statues? I couldn't bear the thought.

SO I stayed. Stayed and studied. Studied sorcery in the great black library of Julius Margate. Studied sorcery in the shadowed silence of dust-shrouded shelves.

I pored intently through endless pages, peered at passages in musty, iron-girdled tomes, perused with a perilous purpose.

For I was seeking a spell—an evocation—a rune or incantation—a rite or ritual—whereby I could summon my friends to animate life again. I sought to shatter that shroud of stone that swathed their souls.

Somewhere I must stumble across a solution, a means to kindle living flesh from marble. A mystic

Pygmalion, I sought the formula to evoke a half-dozen Galateas.

There must be a way!

I read, and shuddered. Here and there were hints. Only a linguist could hope to translate Greek, Latin, medieval French and German, Sanskrit, Arabic and Hebrew.

Once translated, only a devotee of mantic arts would risk his soul to perform the dark offices necessary to conjure up Those who might grant the baleful boon of forbidden life.

But I searched. Day after day night after night. When the autumnal skies were black as my despair, I read on. When the ravening winds howled as mournfully as the sighs that rose in my throat, I pondered over the yellowed, crumbling pages.

The wings of ancient evil brushed my face and left deep lines etched about my eyes but I read on. I sat till dawn forever seeking a solution for my dark desires.

Seated one night in the study, I heard a knock on the great outer door.

I rose, startled. Wryly, I thought of Poe's *Raven*. But dismissing the absurd fancy with a grin, I shook off my bemusement and stalked down the hall.

As I went striding along, blood flowed back into my cramped limbs. I began to feel a little foolish about the whole thing.

I was going to see another human face finally, and I was self-conscious about the way I'd been spending my time.

More than that, I experienced a curious elation. I didn't know who in the world would be knocking on Julius Margate's door around midnight, but anyone would prove a welcome visitor to me. I thirsted for companionship.

Just the mere act of answering the door brought my spirits up with a bound.

I unchained the door, fumbled with the lock, threw the door open wide.

There was a sudden swoop.

A broomstick hit me in the face.

Riding the broomstick was a witch!

CHAPTER IX

I LAY flat on my back and stared up as the witch swooped into the hallway on her broomstick.

"Whoa, there," muttered the witch, and the broomstick clattered to a halt on the floor. The witch climbed off slowly. A dog and a cat jumped down from the shaft of the broomstick behind her. The witch dumped a large satchel on the floor.

All the while, I stared, recognizing her for what she was. Oh, she was a witch, all-right! The broomstick proved it—and so did the beaked nose, the wrinkled face, the

gray, disheveled hair.

My first impulse was to stay right where I was, on the floor. It seemed somehow safer there. But the witch gave me a withering glance.

"Up off the floor with you," she snapped. "Is that any way to greet a guest?"

She placed her broomstick neatly in the corner.

I rose and faced her, mumbling my name. I didn't have the courage to hold out my hand in greeting.

She took no notice of the omission. A smile revealed her toothless gums.

"I am Miss Terioso," announced the witch. "An old friend of Julius Margate's."

"Is that so?" I answered, brilliantly.

"Used to see him around at covens," the witch explained.

"Covens?"

"Witch Sabbats," Miss Terioso enlightened me.

"But I didn't know he went in for such things."

"Oh, it was just a hobby with him. He dabbled a bit in witchcraft. Dabbled in everything, did Julius Margate. A bit of a dabbler and a bit of a babbler. Eh?"

Miss Terioso laughed. Some of the more sadistic radio advertisers might have liked that laugh for a spot announcement. I didn't care

for it, myself.

"Aren't you going to ask me in?" she demanded. "Where's your courtesy, young sir?"

I indicated the parlor with a weak gesture. Miss Terioso's bent figure crept across the hall. She turned an evil profile toward me, and I'll swear she looked like something only a vulture would love. A mother vulture, at that.

"By the way," she screeched, "better get some milk for my dear pets here. My familiars, dear little lambs."

I stared at the snarling, mangy dog and the hissing, scrawny black cat. They padded towards me stealthily.

HASTILY, I backed into the hall and ran to the kitchen. Returning with a saucer of milk, I found the witch and her two familiars in the parlor under the lamp-light.

"That's a courteous young man," approved Miss Terioso. "Let them sup on milk. Of course it's not as good as the real red stuff, but it's better than nothing. Eh?"

I nodded, but the last half of the nod was a shiver.

"Look at the darlings," commanded the witch. "My two sweet lovelies!"

"What are their names?" I asked, just as if I wanted to know.

"I call the cat Fido and the dog

is named Puss," she told me.

"Very nice," I answered.

The witch sat down and raised her legs. With a shock I noticed that she was wearing slacks under her black skirt.

"Those slacks—" I began.

She giggled softly, like a wounded tigress.

"What's wrong with them?" she demanded. "Nothing immodest about slacks, young sir! I have to wear them. I'm certainly not going to ruin a good pair of silk stockings riding a broomstick."

This sounded logical.

"As it is, I'm worried about a straw shortage for my broom," Miss Terioso complained. She opened her big satchel and took out a woolen knitting bag and two knitting needles.

"Do you knit?" I asked.

She giggled again. "Not exactly."

Reaching into the knitting bag she extracted a tiny wax mannikin and began to stick her knitting needles into its body.

"Just a poppet," she explained. "Do you mind if I work while we talk?"

"Not at all," I gulped.

She put the poppet away and reached into the big satchel again. When her hand emerged again it was clutching something.

A human arm!

She reached in again and drew out a leg. A shapely leg, but a sev-

ered limb, for all that.

"Murderess!" I choked.

Miss Terioso smiled. "Flatterer!" she cooed. "I haven't really murdered anyone in years! No, young sir. These are not human limbs. They are the limbs of a window dummy. Here."

She began to bring out more appendages from her satchel. Another arm, another leg. A torso. And finally, a lovely head with a red wig.

Expertly, she fitted the various parts together. Soon a complete window dummy stood before us. A very pretty redheaded window dummy—distinctly female.

"Just a notion of mine," Miss Terioso explained. "I began to think that my poppets were too small to really get delicate work into them with the needles. So I bought this window dummy. It's still a wax figure, but a life-size one. Clever, eh?"

"Clever is no word for it," I said. And it wasn't.

Suddenly Miss Terioso shrugged.

"But let us get down to business, then," she declared. "I am here for a definite reason. I want Julius Margate."

"You can't see him." I spoke too rapidly to be cautious about it. "You can't see him. He's turned to stone."

The witch grinned.

"I know. I know all about it.

He's stone and the rest of his freaks are statues, too. And I want him."

"You want his statue?"

"Yes."

Was I crazy, or did Miss Terioso blush slightly?

"I—I used to have a crush on the old fool," she explained. "I'd like to have him around for sentimental reasons."

Somehow this didn't sound convincing. She looked about as sentimental as a barracuda.

There was more here than met the eye. I decided. So I also decided on a little strategy.

"By the way, Miss Terioso," I began. "Before we get down to details—would you care for a little refreshment?"

The witch simpered. "Don't mind if I do, young sir. Have you a bit of human—" She checked herself hastily. "No, I don't suppose you would," she sighed.

"Be right back," I promised.

AND I was. I went down to the cellar, rummaged around, and emerged with a fifth of Irish whiskey and two glasses. Bearing the refreshments back to the parlor, I poured out two neat shots.

Miss Terioso drained her glass. I refilled it.

Miss Terioso drank the second as a chaser, so I refilled it again.

"Very pleasant," she told me. "I

enjoy something mild for a change."

"One of Margate's prize bottles," I remarked.

"Speaking of bottles," she interrupted, "I meant to tell you this before. I not only want to buy Margate and the other statues, but that geni in the bottle as well. He has a geni in a bottle hasn't he?"

I admitted it. "But what I want to know," I said, filling her glass for the fifth time, "is what you want with those statues."

She drank. I refilled her glass.

"I told you," she repeated. "I am sentimental about the old son of a poltergeist. I'd like to have him around to look at. Eh?"

The liquor was working. The witch was getting slightly tipsy. I refilled her glass once more and proceeded artfully.

"Come now," I coaxed. "We're friends, aren't we? You can tell me the truth. What do you really want with those statues?"

"Ha!" cackled Miss Terioso. "He's so artful, this kind young sir. Methinks he wants me to betray the fact that I intend to re-animate those statues myself and bring them back to life. But he'll never squeeze a word about it from me, he won't! Eh?"

I smiled and pressed my fingers together judiciously before my face.

"Suppose someone wanted to bring the statues back to life," I

said, just as if I'd never heard her maunderings. "Would it be possible through sorcery?"

"Anything is possible through sorcery, my pet," said the witch. "If one is willing to pay the price."

She cackled, grabbed the bottle, and clawed it to her scrawny bosom.

"Now the price for a fine young man like you would be high," she mumbled. "But an old hand like myself—blast you, there are ways and means of paying very little. Of striking bargains, as it were. I should conjure a demon . . . a friendly one, of course . . . and I should not sell my soul. I could not, for I sold it long ago. Long, long ago."

The witch began to sing *Long, Long Ago* in a voice like a tugboat's whistle. I coughed discreetly.

"Eh? It's the problem of animating those statues, isn't it, dear sir?" Miss Terioso smiled. "I have a sort of *ad* due bill on Hell, so to speak. There are certain powers and perquisites coming to me. I should just summon my demon, ask the boon, and the statues would be warm flesh and blood in the twinkling of an owl's eye!"

She drank again.

"But how do you summon demons?" I demanded.

"You hold a Black Mass," she answered. Everybody knows that." Suddenly a look of crafty reticence

spread over her wrinkled countenance. "But I'm talking too much. I see that now. I'll not tell you how to hold a Mass to Satan, never fear. I'd be such a silly to tell you, eh?"

I was prepared for this. For suddenly I saw a way of bringing back my friends. So I proceeded deliberately about my appointed task.

"You can't fool me," I mocked. "You and your talk about Black Masses and witchcraft." I rose and smiled. "You and your ridiculous little wax figures. And this foolish looking window dummy here!" I tapped the red-headed dummy with an accusing finger.

"You aren't a witch," I told her. "Just a broken-down dressmaker, I'm thinking! All this is nonsense."

She rose to the bait.

"Nonsense, is it?" screeched Miss Terioso. "I'm not a witch eh? I, the most famous sorceress in three continents and four dimensions?"

"Black Mass," I chortled, scornfully. "That's horseplay of another color."

Miss Terioso gulped the last drink in the bottle and lurched to her feet. She stared at me with bloodshot eyes.

"You can't hold a Black Mass," I snickered.

"Oh, can't I?" snarled the witch. "I'll show you! I'll not only hold

a Black Mass—I'll blessed well hold one with stripes if you like!"

CHAPTER X

MISS TERIOSO swayed out into the wide hallway. I followed at her rundown heels, gasping in mingled apprehension and excitement.

Then we stood in the huge room that held the statuary. I lit a lamp and revealed the stony images of my friends. There was pot-bellied little Julius Margate, his face a marble mask of bewilderment. Gaunt Mr. Simpkins hovered, his false teeth forever frozen in an embarrassed grin. Jory, as a stone wolf, held a petrified paw in the air. Gerymanx was a noble Grecian centaur and looked somehow natural in stone. And Trina made a beautiful mermaid. She had a gorgeous shape—plenty of these and those, and fins, too.

I sighed.

The witch wheezed alcoholically in my face.

"Think I can't do it?" she muttered.

"A Black Mass? It's ridiculous," I told her. "I understand you must draw a pentagon in blue chalk, and use holy wafers and sacramental wine. And you intone the Lord's Prayer backwards in Latin, and use the body of a naked woman for an altar."

"Right," said the witch.

"Well, you haven't got the facilities, so that's that!" I jeered.

Miss Terioso tittered drunkenly.

"I'll fix that," she promised.

"You've got some chalk, haven't you, dear boy? Margate must have some around for his own spells."

I rummaged through the library and returned with a stub of blue phosphorescent chalk.

I found Miss Terioso on her way back from the kitchen, laden with packages.

"Here's the chalk."

She set to work on hands and knees, drawing a glowing blue line. Panting, she arose.

"That's no pentagon," I exclaimed.

"There's only four sides to it."

"Ran out of chalk," mumbled the witch. "It doesn't matter, really."

She faced me and began to chew on something.

"Holy wafer?" I asked.

"No," said Miss Torioso. "Haven't got any. This is a graham cracker. Same thing, almost."

She drank something out of a cup.

"Sacramental wine?"

"Coca-cola," the witch explained.

"They will probably never know the difference."

Suddenly she ran tipsily out of the room and returned with the window dummy, which she placed

across two chairs.

"We have no naked woman for an altar, so the dummy will have to do," said Miss Terioso. "Here goes for the invocation."

As the phosphorescent chalk glowed in the darkness, the witch crouched over the window dummy mumbling sonorously.

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "That doesn't sound like the Lord's Prayer backwards in Latin."

"Don't remember the Latin," sighed the witch. "I'm using pig-Latin."

She continued. After a moment she began to make passes with her clawlike hands. Her voice deepened, then rose shrilly. I recognized rumbling syllables and shrieking vocables.

The cadence was rhythmic. In my fancy the blue lines of the pentagon began to dance in pulsation with her pronouncements.

It wasn't fancy. The lines moved. The room swayed. Her voice shrieked.

Miss Terioso turned blue in the face. Her drunken mumblings slurred oddly. She began to sway.

The sight was very impressive. She looked just as though she had been given a Mickey Finn.

With a supernatural belch, Miss Terioso slid to the floor in a dead faint.

"Out like a light," I sighed. "Oh well, I might have known the old

hag couldn't do it."

"Do what?"

"Why, that she couldn't—*hey!*" I wheeled suddenly as I realized that a strange voice had addressed me.

Staring across the blue line I saw the strange owner of the strange voice.

This time I almost slid to the floor.

But not quite. I gazed at the presence on the other side of the pseudo-pentagon.

Was it a demon?

If demons have red, scaly bodies like gigantic lizards, and semi-anthropomorphic limbs, slick hairless skulls, and faces like grinning death—then it was a demon, all right.

Or a demon, all wrong.

Because despite this terrifying aspect, there was something horribly bedraggled about this apparition.

HIS eyes were bloodshot. His checks were scratched. His arms hung limply, and his chest rose and fell in despairing gasps. I noticed that his tail was dragging.

"Go ahead," said the deep voice, in accents that congealed my vertebrae. "Go ahead, make sport of me! You accursed human midge! You ensorcelled scum, you foul thaumaturgical imposter! You're not fit to be impaled on a spit for a weenie roast in hell!"

"What do you mean?" I gulped.

"What do I mean? The infernal impudence of the nigromantic nincompoop! I mean you bungled the whole ceremony! You used the wrong materials, you gave the wrong accent to the invocations, you even left out part of the Gloric Chant!"

"But—"

"And what does that mean? I'll tell you what," snarled the demon, and his eyes flashed at 400 degrees Fahrenheit. "It means I was dragged bodily through five-dimensional space. It means I was twisted through the veritable warpings in the spatial continuum! I was bruised and battered and banged and buffeted, and nearly annihilated before I got here! My mundane simulacrum was almost impossible to assume.

"And why? Because an amateur sorcerer like yourself didn't know how to call me. Why you don't know enough to raise the dead! Why don't you read the rule books?"

"Wait a minute," I temporized. "I didn't call you. She did— Miss Terioso, the witch. She was drunk and forgot a lot of things."

"Drunk eh?" said the demon, with a self-righteous smirk. "Serves her right. Never touch the stuff myself. Wine is a mocker."

I nodded.

The demon did an alarming

thing. He thrust his head out on his rubbery neck. It stretched a good foot.

As he darted his skull forward and back restlessly, I diffidently jumped a yard to one side.

"Well, now that I'm here, what are you going to do about it?" demanded the demon. "Have I wriggled through the dimensions all for nothing? I want something to eat, something to kill, or something to bargain over."

"I'll bargain with you," I said boldly.

"You? The demon sniffed. "You aren't a sorcerer. What can you offer me? Your soul?"

"I don't think so," I hesitated.

"Current rate of exchange is very favorable," said the demon suddenly all coaxing smiles. "I pay highest prices."

"Not interested," I insisted.

"Then I might as well go," the demon sighed.

Inspiration smote me.

"Wait a minute," I snapped.

"I'll give you a wonderful trade. How would you like to own a geni?"

"A geni? You have a geni?" The glare on the demon's face registered red incredulity. "I doubt that very much."

"I have a geni in a bottle," I told him. "Wait right here and I'll be back in a flash with the flask."

He waited, and I was.

Barely a minute passed before I

returned, bearing the curious old bottle from Margate's library. Within it gurgled the geni, like a shrunken mermaid.

The demon goggled.

"You *have* got one at that," he admitted. His eyes narrowed to cunning slits.

"What are you asking for it?" he purred.

"A boon."

"Be specific."

"I want these statues reanimated," I said, waving my arm to embrace the stone images around me.

"I want their souls, or life-force to return to flesh instead of stone."

"That's very difficult," said the demon, thoughtfully. "Couldn't you settle for something easier? How about a blonde? Lots of you magicians seem to go for deals involving blondes. A nice blond *succubae*, now, with big—"

"Never mind," I insisted, "I want those statues alive."

The demon shrugged. "I don't know."

"Think of the geni," I said, shaking the bottle. "One of your own kind. A helpless prisoner in a bottle. How would you like to be shut up in a bottle, like— like an olive?"

The demon winced. I knew I had him.

"I am too soft-hearted," he rumbled. "But I'll do it. Or try to do it. A most unusual request, and

there's so much to arrange."

"Get to work," I said. "I'll toss you the bottle in a moment."

"Hold on," advised the demon. "This is liable to be a bit messy."

It was.

I didn't mind the way the air changed colors as the demon crouched in the center of the room, croaking gutturally as he squatted like a malignant frog.

I didn't mind the great quaking wind that rose to howl through my hair.

I didn't mind the smoke and the flame.

But when the chandelier crashed from the ceiling and hit me on the head, I minded very much indeed.

The world went black and I went to sleep beside Miss Terioso on the floor.

There was a confused impression of a gigantic hand grasping the geni-bottle, a muffled illusion of smoke and shouting, and then I went out, like the proverbial light.

The next thing I knew I was awake, spitting out a mouthful of broken glass.

"What a hangover!" I whispered.

"Oh, yeah?" said a strange voice.

CHAPTER XI

I SAT up. Miss Terioso and the shattered chandelier still lay on the floor. But the demon had

vanished from the chalk formation, and the bottle with the geni was nowhere to be seen.

I groped for the light, seeking the source of the voice.

Radiance flooded the room and I stared at the statues.

Statues no longer!

They *were* alive. I saw familiar flesh once more. The grotesque bodies of men and the wolf and the centaur and mermaid were moving.

I ran over to Trina. The beautiful mermaid with the lovely green hair stared up at me with a radiant smile.

"Trina, darling!" I whispered, taking her in my arms.

"Get away from me or I'll kick your teeth down your throat with my hoofs!" boomed a gruff voice.

"But you have no hoofs, dear," I laughed. "You're a mermaid. You have a—"

"Don't you call me 'dear', you oaf! I'm a centaur!" growled the voice.

I stepped back in dismay.

That voice—I recognized it—was the voice of Gerymanx the centaur! But it came from Trina's body!

I rushed over to Gerymanx.

"Hello, my friend," came the calm words. Again I recognized the voice from the centaur's body. It was the voice of Julius Margate!

"Who—who are you?" I whispered.

The centaur smiled. "I'm Margate, of course. Who else would I be?"

I gulped. "You're sure?"

"Of course."

"Come here." I grabbed the centaur's arm and led the figure over to a full-length mirror.

"Take a look," I suggested.

HE looked at him—at the horse body projecting behind him. When he saw what he was dragging around in the rear, the man almost collapsed.

"But I'm Margate!" he wailed.

"What am I doing in Gerymanx's body?"

"What is Gerymanx doing in Trina's body?" I asked.

"Who is in my body?" Margate suddenly yelled. He ran over to confront his body and reached out a cautious hand to grasp the chest.

"What are you reaching for, dearie?" lisped a high voice. "Be careful how you handle my trunk,"

"Myrtle!" whispered Margate. "Myrtle, the hamadryad."

"Of course," answered Myrtle. "Can't you recognize my limbs?"

"What is all this?" demanded the rasping voice that had roused me from unconsciousness. I turned to face tall Mr. Simpkins.

"Why am I not a wolf?" demanded the voice. "Who stole my form? Why am I a wolf in My Simpkins' clothing?"

It was Jory the werewolf, in the vampire's body. As I expected, the vampire was now wearing the wolf-form instead.

"Is this a way for a self-respecting vampire to be?" groaned the wolf. "Going around on all fours like an animal?"

"Something terrible has happened," I gasped. "You're alive, but your souls got into the wrong bodies. The demon made a mistake. You've switched."

Then I remembered. Gerymanx was in Trina's body. But where was Trina?

I stared out the open window. Then I saw it—the tree, the tree of Myrtle the hamadryad. Trina had to be in the tree! It must have been transformed through the open window like the rest of the statuary.

Running across the room, I bounded out on the lawn and threw my arms around the tree-trunk.

"Trina," I whispered. "Trina, darling!" There was no answer.

"Trina, speak to me!"

Not a leaf rustled.

I stumbled back into the room. "Trina," I groaned.

"Here I am, darling!"

The familiar voice fired my blood.

I turned my head.

Coming toward me was —
the red-headed window dummy!

She fell into my embrace, the lovely waxen figure, and we kissed.

I shuddered. She was alive—but still wax.

Now I understood. In the mixup, the window dummy, having, no soul, probably entered Myrtle's tree. Trina entered the body of the window dummy.

So there we stood.

A vampire in a werewolf's body, a werewolf in a vampire's. A man in a centaur's form, and a centaur in a mermaid. A mermaid in a window dummy, and a tree nymph in the shape of a man.

And I myself, in one hell of a mess!

MISS TERIOSO couldn't have picked a worse moment to regain consciousness. Which is probably why she picked this moment.

The witch rose from the floor and her bleary gaze swept the room more thoroughly than her broom could have done the job. In a moment comprehension came to her.

"So you made your own bargain with the demon," she scolded me. "Gave him the geni, I warrant? A clever young sir, aren't you. I've a good mind to—"

Then she saw the face of Julius Margate.

Instantly a change swept over Miss Terioso. I remembered she had admitted having a crush on

Mr. Margate—and her actions now confirmed the fact.

She simpered coyly, straightened her stringy hair, and assumed a smile such as one sees on the face of a particularly hungry crocodile.

"Why Julius my dear!" she gushed, advancing on Mr. Margate with a sickening leer. "I'm so glad to see you."

"Keep your hands off me, you old cow!" shrilled a high voice.

Miss Terioso halted and stared at the man.

"Don't look at me that way, you Walpurgistic wench!" said the voice from Margate's body.

Miss Terioso, not realizing that Margate's body was now inhabited by Myrtle the hamadryad, was confused.

"Here I am," called another voice. "It's me, Julius Margate, over here."

The witch turned to face the centaur. Her face was shock-proof, but her lips twitched.

"Don't you recognize me, sugar?" asked Julius Margate, waving his tail coyly.

Miss Terioso gaped at the centaur.

"Who is making sport of me?" she snapped. "What sort of jest are you playing?"

"Nobody's making fun of you," insisted Margate. "Come on over and get friendly. I'll give you a ride around the block if you like."

The witch froze. "I don't want a ride around the block," she announced. "I'm getting out of here."

She swooped across the hall and returned with the cat and dog under her arm. She set her satchel and broomstick down.

"I'm leaving, baggage and broomstick," sniffed Miss Terioso. "Oh, yes, I must take my window dummy, too."

"Not me," said Trina.

The witch goggled at the red-headed wax dummy.

"Did you speak?" she demanded.

"Of course. What's the matter with your ears, outside of their looks?" Trina replied.

"Something is very much wrong here," the witch declared.

"I've been trying to tell you," I said. I explained briefly.

Miss Terioso nodded.

"Nevertheless, the window dummy is mine. It's my poppet, and I shall pop off with it."

"Go fly your broomstick," shrilled Trina the mermaid. "And don't call me a dummy, you Halloween bag!"

"She's right," said Margate, from the centaur's body. "You have no claim on a soul. You'd better go now."

"You dare to order me out of your house?" screamed the witch.

"I dare to throw you out," said Margate.

Miss Terioso made for the door, hastily. She mounted her broomstick and turned.

"Very well," she sniffed. "Good riddance to all of you. And as for you, Julius Margate, you're just a—oh, go look in a rear-view mirror and see what you are!"

The door banged shut behind her.

THERE was an ominous silence. I felt the danger of that silence. I knew my peculiar friends. They were bad enough to handle in their own weird bodies. But now that those bodies were all mixed up, I'd better do something in a hurry.

"You must be hungry after such an ordeal," I said. "Let's all go out to the kitchen and I'll whip up a snack to eat."

We did.

They ate ravenously. The sight of a mermaid eating oats and a centaur smoking a cigar rather spoiled my own appetite. And the clumsiness of all of them in their new forms did something to general table manners. But hunger ruled for a while.

Then they finished, and gloom reigned.

"This is a fine mess sighed Gerymanx. "What do we do now? Usually after a meal I go out for a brisk trot around the stable and grounds. But now I'm a mermaid.

I can't even canter."

"I'd like to go out and have the birds perch on my limbs," sighed Myrtle. "But I can't, in this man's body. It's so difficult. I doubt if I can even get a robin to build a nest in my hair."

"Don't you dare put bird-nests in my hair," yelled Margate, from the centaur's body.

"Your hair?"

"That body you're wearing still belongs to me," Margate insisted. "I expect you to take good care of it."

"What about me?" asked Jory, disconsolately. "I'd like to howl in the sunshine at dawn. But in a vampire's body I'll have to sleep all day in a musty old coffin."

"That's nothing," responded Mr. Simpkins the vampire. "Just look at me in this wolf's form! I'm afraid I'm going to shed all over the place. And I can't seem to get the knack of changing back into a man! You'll have to give me some lessons soon, Jory."

"Your troubles are mild," insisted Julius Margate. "How can I go out in polite society in a centaur's body? It's enough to give anybody a fright."

Trina pouted at me from the window dummy's body.

"Can I take a swim in the pool?" she whispered.

"No. Your wax will spoil," I told her sadly.

"We've got to settle this problem somehow," said Julius Margate. "Wonder if we could call up that demon again and make him put us in the right bodies?"

"Not without selling somebody's soul," I told my employer. "I've made the only trade I could, and from now on, souls are the articles of exchange. And I won't sell my soul, I'll tell you that!"

Margate shook his head.

"We'll have to figure it out," he declared. "It can't go on like this forever. It isn't natural for a werewolf to be a vampire, and a centaur to be mermaid."

"It isn't natural for a mermaid to be a window dummy either," said my red-headed companion. "I'm dying to be tearing a herring."

Her words smote my heart.

"I'll think of something, folks," I promised. "Tomorrow night, when Mr. Jory wakes up at sundown in Mr. Simpkins' body, we can get together again and figure something out. Right now we all need sleep after this excitement."

So, yawning at dawning, we went to bed.

I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. But I didn't dream.

The way things were going, I was having my nightmares when I was wide awake.

“WE’VE got to do something, right now!” insisted Julius Margate, over the supper table.

The heads of his bedraggled companions nodded in eager assent.

“I’m sick of sleeping in a coffin,” said Jory the werewolf. “I want to go back to my dog kennel.” He shot a malicious glance at Mr. Simpkins in his wolf’s body.

Simpkins wagged his tail. “What about me?” he complained. “I turned into a man in the daylight but when the sun set tonight I became a wolf again. And I don’t like it. I think I’m getting the mange.”

Gerymanx the centaur, in his mermaid form, propped both elbows on the table and sighed. “Being a mermaid is no fun, either,” he declared. “I can’t go near that swimming pool unless I get a pair of water wings.

“Imagine a mermaid who doesn’t know how to swim!”

He started to expand on the theme, then turned in shocked surprise to survey the body of Julius Margate. Julius Margate’s human body rose and began to divest itself of clothing.

“What goes on here?” I asked, in a startled voice.

“Oh,” said Myrtle the hama-dryad, from within Margate’s body. “I’m just pruning off these clothes, that’s all. I can’t stand the pressure on my limbs.”

“Please, for the sake of decency,”

I protested. “Wait a while. I’ll find a way to restore you all to your proper shapes.”

“Hurry, darling.” It was the voice of Trina in my ear. The wax dummy leaned close. “I do so want to kiss you,” said the girl, wistfully. “But every time I try it, my head falls off.”

“Yes, hurry up,” yelled Julius Margate, from the body of Gerymanx the centaur. “I’m afraid to visit the barber shop to get my tail clipped.”

“Too bad,” I sympathized.

“And that’s not all,” sighed Margate. “I wish you’d go and steal the witch’s broom and use it to sweep out the stable.”

“There’s an idea!” cried Trina.

“What?”

“Why don’t you go and visit the witch tomorrow? Persuade *her* to hold another Black Mass.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, she has some kind of a due-bill on hell, hasn’t she? She can get the demon to switch us back into our regular bodies. Then we can be self-respecting mermaids and vampires and werewolves again.”

“Brilliant!” said Margate.

“But the witch is mad at *us*,” I objected.

“Then you must soften her up,” Margate told me. “Make love to her, or something.”

“Make love to a witch? A dizzy

old spinster like her?"

"She's not so bad," Margate lied.

"She's not exactly a spring chicken, either," I answered. "She's more like a vulture."

"It's the only way out," Margate snapped "You'll have to do it. You can't let us down this way."

I sighed and nodded.

Trina nibbled my ear with waxen lips. "Just remember," she whispered. "Make love to her, but no funny stuff. I get jealous so easily. Why it makes my wax melt to think of you in her arms."

"It makes my blood freeze to think of that," I replied.

"Even if you have ice-cubes in your veins, you must go through with it," implored Julius Margate. "Tomorrow you woo the witch."

And so it was decided.

NEXT afternoon, after getting directions from Julius Margate I left the mansion on the hill and set out along a winding path through the woods to the house of Miss Terioso.

Carrying a basket on my arm, I approached the cottage feeling like Little Red Riding Hood on her way to Grandma's house.

Miss Terioso's cottage looked something like Grandma's house at that—except for the red and green smoke that poured from the crumbling stone chimney as I walked up the path.

The smoke assumed ghastly, billowing shapes, and I averted my eyes. I preferred to read the signs on the cottage lawn.

"MISS TERIOSO—BLACK, WHITE, & ALL COLORS OF MAGIC"

"LOVE PHILTRES. FORTUNES TOLD. PSYCHO-ANALYSIS" "UNFAMILIAR SPIRITS KEEP OUT"

I knocked on the door, letting my trembling wrist provide the leverage.

Miss Terioso stuck her head out. "We don't want any," she said. "Oh, it's you, young sir. Step in, won't you?"

I would, and did.

There was a bearskin rug in the hallway. As I put my foot on it, it grunted horribly, and the gigantic head rose with gnashing teeth.

"Down, Bruno!" commanded the witch. The rug subsided, and regarded me through malevolent glass eyes.

I stood in the witch's cottage glancing around at the ancient furniture—1890 vintage, and typical of an old maid's home.

Miss Terioso resumed her seat by the fire and took up her knitting. She was silent, absorbed.

I looked at the placards on the walls. There was a Charter Membership in Local Coven Number 9, a neatly embroidered motto, decorated with mandrake roots, reading

"A Fiend in Need Is a Fiend Indeed."

Then I broke the silence.

"What are you knitting?" I inquired.

"Oh, just a shroud," said Miss Terioso, brightly.

I coughed. "I've brought you a little present," I coaxed.

Her eyes brightened. I handed her the basket. She opened the cover.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Just a little wax fruit."

"Wax fruit?"

"To melt down into poppets," I explained.

Miss Terioso favored me with a warm smile.

"How kind of you," she gushed.

I turned on the charm. "I was so delighted to see you the other evening," I said, sitting down. "I admired you greatly."

"You *did*?" She positively simpered.

"Yes. I said to myself, 'now there's a girl with real high spirits about her,' that's what I said."

"Flatterer! I usually consort with low spirits," Miss Terioso gurgled.

"I was wondering if you'd care to have a date with me," I ventured. "How about going out tonight?"

"Why, there's no Sabbath tonight."

"I wasn't thinking of a Sabbath," I answered. "Just a little stepping.

You know, hitting a few high spots."

"You really want to?" beamed the witch.

She blushed. "Very well. But first I must go to the beauty parlor. I'll drop you off at home on the way and then pick you up afterwards when we go out."

Miss Terioso rose and bustled over to her broomstick.

I gulped.

"We're not going to ride that thing, are we?" I asked.

"Why, of course," she declared.

Trembling, I mounted the broomstick behind her. She opened the cottage door, muttered a few words under her breath and we were off in the twilight.

CHAPTER XIII

I DON'T know whether or not you've ever ridden a broomstick, but it's not an experience one is likely to forget. I don't like to think about that soaring sweep through dusk-driven skies. All I can say is that for my money, the broomstick will never replace the horse.

When I was finally dropped off—literally—at my destination—Miss Terioso waved farewell and called that she would come back from the beauty parlor and pick me up again.

For several minutes I wondered

if she would have to pick me up, actually, before I'd be able to stir. But after a time I groaned, stood up and hobbled into the house.

The gang bombarded me with questions.

"Did you see her?"

"What did she say?"

"Did you make a date?"

I answered definitely. "I'm taking Miss Terioso out to dine and dance this evening," I announced. "Margate, I'm borrowing one of your tuxedos. And about \$30 in cash."

Trina walked up to me, her wax arms swinging in agitation.

"I'm jealous," she confessed.

"Take me with you as a chaperone."

"Impossible," I sighed.

"Then I'll go alone, with Myrtle in Margate's body," she declared. "I don't trust you with that baleful hag."

"I'll hitch up the station-wagon," Margate chimed in. "Then I'll harness myself to it and pull the rest of you into town."

I protested.

"Do you want to spoil everything? You'll make a terrible scene in human society! Leave everything to me," I argued.

"But—"

There was a thump from upstairs.

Miss Terioso had made a three-point landing on the roof.

"Get out of sight," I command-

ed. "Don't let her see you and arouse her anger. I'll skip upstairs and change and crawl out the skylight to join her. Now all of you stay here and behave. I'll have you back in your bodies before morning."

They scattered, and I scampered.

Five minutes later I joined Miss Terioso on the roof.

I stared at the vision in the starlight.

For Miss Terioso was changed. The magic of the beauty parlor had wrought a startling transformation.

This was no old crone who awaited me, but a radiantly lovely woman—a vivid brunette with lips red as love's own fire. Her eyes sparkled and she smiled with pleasure as she noted my reaction.

"Life in the old gal yet, eh?" she said. Her voice was low, husky.

I said nothing, but mounted the broomstick and put my arms around her. Her nearness was intoxicating.

We sailed up toward the stars. Her hair streamed in the wind, mingling with the moonlight.

I enjoyed the ride.

All incongruity was forgotten. By the time we landed on a fire-escape and clambered down to reach a nightclub entrance, we were chatting merrily.

We swept into the lobby of the club and Miss Terioso checked her broomstick in the cloakroom.

A waiter led us across the dance-floor to a table.

"Champagne," I ordered.

I didn't need it. I was intoxicated as I say, by her presence. But revolving drunkenly in the back of my brain was the consciousness of my purpose.

Soon I would artfully wheedle and cajole her into changing my friends back. But the evening was young now, and I could enjoy myself first. Enjoy her company. Gaze into those burning black eyes. Hold her flowery-fragrant fingers.

We lifted our glasses.

"Here's to you," murmured Miss Terioso.

"Here's to—us," I corrected.

"Yes," she sighed.

We drank.

After that I tried to sit on her lap.

Now, thinking back, I know what must have happened. Miss Teroiso was an old hand at the game.

She'd probably anticipated this, the old she-wolf, and slipped a love philtre into my drink.

But the effects were startling.

All at once I knew that I was madly in love with Miss Terioso. The thought of my friends, the thought of Trina—all was forgotten.

SHE gave me a demure glance and I held her hand and stared

into her inscrutable eyes and I leaned forward over the table, and then I got hit in the head with a human leg.

Yes, a human leg sailed through the air and hit me on the back of the head!

That's one way to sober a fellow up.

I turned quickly and stared!

Lying on the floor was a leg. With a shock, I recognized it. Trina's leg, from the window dummy!

Employing my knowledge of trajectory I wheeled around and stared at a table across the way.

Sure enough, Trina had made good her threat! She sat at another table with Myrtle in Margate's body.

I collected my scattered wits hastily. Then, bending down, I collected the scattered leg, rose politely, mumbled an excuse to Miss Terioso, and stalked over to the table carrying the wax leg.

"Pardon me, madam, but I think you've lost something," I said, for the benefit of eavesdroppers. Trina accepted the leg, bent down, fastened it on again, and winked.

"What the hell's the big idea?" I whispered furiously. "I thought I told you to stay home."

"We're going to keep an eye on you," Trina answered. "After getting an eyeful of that glamorous

hag, I don't trust you any further than I can throw my limbs."

"We're all here," added Myrtle, from Margate's body.

"No!"

But as I glanced around, I saw Mr. Simpkins and Jory at another table, in each other's bodies. Jory's body had resumed human shape.

"Margate and Gerymanx are outside, in the centaur's and mermaid's bodies," Myrtle added. "They came in the wagon."

"I hope to heaven they stay there," I sighed. "What if the customers saw them?"

It was a hideous thought. As things were, the situation was bad enough. No sooner had I uttered the words than I caught a snatch of conversation between Myrtle and a stranger at the adjoining table.

Myrtle, in Margate's body, had probably been drinking. The stranger certainly had. His little bloodshot eyes revolved woozily as he mumbled.

"Pardon me," sir," he hiccuped. "But that lady at th' table wish' you—has she got wooden leg, huh?"

"Sure," answered Myrtle, gaily.

"Mos' unusual," said the drunk.

"What's unusual about that?" demanded Myrtle, suddenly argumentative. "Why shouldn't she have a wooden leg? Me, I'm *all* wood!"

Under the influence of liquor, Myrtle forgot she was in Margate, and thought of herself as still being a hamadryad in a tree. But the drunken stranger didn't know this. He peered incredulously.

"You're all wood?" he echoed.

"Of course," said Myrtle. "Do you want to examine my trunk?"

"You're crazy!" sneered the drunk, wobbling to his feet.

"I am not," said Myrtle. "I can prove that I'm a tree. Why, I even have termites!"

"I wouldn't brag about it sir."

"Say, who are you calling sir?" shrilled Myrtle. "I'll have you know I'm a lady! A hamadryad."

The drunk stared at Julius Margate's body.

"I wouldn't admit such a thing," he declared passionately.

"What's wrong with that?" Myrtle flung back. "Some of my best friends are hamadryads! And if you don't stop annoying me—I'll have my girl friend throw her head at you!"

The drunk drew back in panic.

Mr. Simpkins, in Jory's body, stalked over to the scene and quickly led Myrtle away in time to prevent mayhem.

Jory, in Mr. Simpkin's body, quietly left the room.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Miss Terioso advancing on me. I kicked Trina's waxen shin.

"Keep quiet from now on," I or-

dered. "Nearly had a riot as it is. Now I'll steer Miss Terioso away from here before she recognizes you."

I turned, bowed to the advancing witch.

"Let's dance," I suggested.

I danced with the witch on the nightclub floor while my window dummy sweetheart regarded me with a smouldering light in her lovely glass eyes.

CHAPTER XIV

FORTUNATELY, I was dancing and didn't see the scene in the outer bar. But I heard about it later—plenty.

Mr. Simpkins, in Jory's body, had retired to the bar for a quiet and meditative drink.

"What'll it be?" asked the bartender.

"Got any bl—give me Scotch," said Mr. Simpkins, quickly, erasing his original thought.

The Scotch arrived. Simpkins paid for it with a \$20 bill.

The sight of the greenback fluttering in the breeze acted as an unwitting signal to a tall blonde draped over the end of the bar. She uncoiled herself and advanced sinuously on Mr. Simpkins.

"You look sad, Mister," she observed. "Are you lonesome?"

This remarkable technique overpowered Mr. Simpkins quite com-

pletely. He was pretty unworldly, being a supernatural entity.

"I am sad," he sighed.

"Tell Olga what the matter is," coaxed the blonde, summoning the bartender and ordering a Silver Fizz. "Why are you sad?"

"Well," breathed Mr. Simpkins, "I used to be a vampire, but I'm not any more."

Olga blinked. This stranger was pretty drunk.

"You know how it is," he mournfully observed. "I'm hungry for blood. Now all I get is dog biscuits."

"Say," said Olga, perturbed. "Who do you think you're kidding? That's a funny line for a guy to hand out to a girl. You look like a wolf to me."

This was definitely the wrong thing to say.

"I am a wolf," muttered Mr. Simpkins.

"What do you mean, you're a wolf?" laughed Olga, back on familiar territory again. "You've got to show me, brother!"

Mr. Simpkins, naive soul, sighed.

"Right here?" he asked.

"Sure. Why not?"

"All right," said Mr. Simpkins. "I'll show you."

He descended from his bar stool and crouched on the floor. He threw his head back and began to whimper. Suddenly his body seemed to quiver. A plastic horripila-

tion coursed through his frame. His forehead melted to a slant. His nose lengthened. His arms and legs furred.

Mr. Simpkins turned into a werewolf on the barroom floor.

Olga saw and was convinced. She was so convinced she began to scream.

About that time, Miss Terioso and I were dancing near the doorway. Miss Terioso heard the scream and turned her head.

She looked out.

Her gaze was not attracted by Mr. Simpkins, but by Jory. He stood at the checking counter, and he was grabbing Miss Terioso's broom.

"Come on," gasped my dancing-partner, running off the floor.

"Where are you going with my broomstick?" she yelled at the fleeing Jory.

"I'm just borrowing it to use outside," he called. "Don't forget, Margate is in Gerymanx's body out there."

"Come back here," yelled the witch, leaping after him.

Hell broke loose with a vengeance.

Miss Terioso clawed at Jory. She beat the poor man over the head with her broomstick, uttering shrill imprecations.

A flying form launched past me as I wavered in the doorway.

It was Trina, in the window

dummy's body. She hurled herself on Miss Terioso, valiantly coming to Jory's aid.

Miss Terioso turned.

Before I could intervene, she grappled with the red-headed dummy. Before the eyes of the shrieking spectators, she tore the window dummy apart, literally limb from limb.

A torso, a head, and pairs of arms and legs fell to the floor.

Behind me came another scream. I turned in time to see Myrtle, in Margate's body, exchanging wild blows with the drunk from the next table.

"Good God, what next?" I gasped.

I started toward the howling wolf on the floor. Then something thundered past me from the outer door.

Margate, in the body of the centaur, charged into the night-club lobby. Squirming in his arms was the mermaid—Greymanx. Stamping his hoofs, the terrible apparition bearing its hideous burden, roared down the bar.

"What is all this?" boomed Margate, flicking his tail and neighing wildly.

Arms encircled me. I turned to face Miss Terioso, brandishing her broomstick.

"Let's get out of here, eh?" she panted. "Get on the broomstick before it's too late."

I mounted in a daze.

The howling wolf, the prancing centaur, the fighting man, and the dismembered body of the window dummy blocked our path. We sailed over them all.

Sailed over them—and into the arms of the police!

CHAPTER XV

JUDGE NUMBOTTOM heard the story. First he heard it from the drunk who insulted Myrtle. Then he heard it from Olga the come-on girl. After that he got a few stumbling sentences out of me.

Finally he listened to Patrolman Lossowitz as he explained the whole thing, from ghastly beginning to untimely end.

"So she says she's a tree, Your Honor," mumbled Lossowitz, unemotionally. "Meanwhile out in the bar this guy is telling Olga he used to be a vampire but now he's a werewolf. And he turns into a wolf.

"Meanwhile the witch tears this other woman to bits, and then the centaur and the mermaid run in, and the witch tries to beat it on a broomstick with this guy here."

Lossowitz pointed to me.

Judge Numbottom pointed to Lossowitz. His face was purple and he could hardly speak. The veins bulged on his bald forehead.

"Stop that kind of talk," he gas-

ped, weakly. "After all, this is a night court, not a bedtime story session. I'm a grown man, Lossowitz, am I not?"

"Yes, Your Honor," said Lossowitz meekly.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, you're not," Lossowitz declared, uncertainly.

"Shut up! You can't think straight or talk straight! Admit you were drinking in this night club!"

"No, Your Honor. Not a drop."

"You don't drink drops, I realize that. Probably a bottle," decided the terrible old man. "But drunk or sober, you couldn't see such things. Bring in the prisoners, Lossowitz, and let me question them myself."

Obediently, Patrolman Lossowitz marched out and returned with Myrtle, Trina, Margate, Gerymanx, Jory, and Mr. Simpkins in tow. Miss Terioso marched before them, indignantly waving her broomstick.

Judge Numbottom took one look at the man, the centaur, the window dummy, the mermaid, the second man, and the wolf. Then he hid his face in his hands.

"No, no!" murmured. "Cover them up. Lossowitz! Get blankets and at least cover some of them up. That horse-thing and that human fish, anyway!"

It was a matter of minutes before Judge Numbottom raised his haggard face. He winced as he

stared at the motley assemblage. Finally his eyes lighted on Miss Terioso as the most attractive and normal-looking prisoner.

"Will you please step forward and answer a few questions," he said, controlling his voice.

Miss Terioso advanced.

"Your name?"

"Miss Terioso."

"Your—your occupation?"

"Oh," she replied lightly. "I'm just a witch."

Judge Numbottom began to turn purple again. "I beg your pardon," he rasped. "I must have misunderstood you."

"I'm just a witch, Your Honor," she said. "I ride broomsticks."

"Go on," sighed the Judge. "You nauseate me strangely."

"Well, it all started when these people turned into statues," said Miss Terioso.

"Statues?"

"Yes, Marble. Stone, you know. They're all statues, really."

"Looks like a statue-tory offense," put in Lossowitz, unhelpfully.

"I don't understand," sighed the Judge.

"This man can confirm my story," said Miss Terioso, pointing her broomstick at me.

"That's right," I answered. "These people were once statues, in my charge. But as you see, they've undergone a change, Your

Honor. That's simple enough. I haven't got all my marble statues any more."

"You haven't got all your marbles any more, you mean!" snarled Judge Numbottom. "Step down, you two. You're driving me crazy!"

Margate, in Gerymanx's body, sidled forward.

"Let me help you," he suggested. "I owned these people before they were statues."

JUDGE NUMBOTTOM looked at the horse's body protruding from under the blanket. He favored Margate with a long, painful scrutiny.

"Who and what are you?" he whispered.

"I'm a centaur."

Lossowitz interfered again. "The guy is lying, Your Honor!" he bawled, excitedly. "He ain't no centaur. I seen lots of centaurs when I was in Washington!"

"Shut up!" thundered the Judge. "Let me speak to the others."

He addressed the mermaid in the centaur's arms.

"What about you, young lady?" he asked, forcing a smile. "What is the reason for your—ah—piscatorial disguise?"

"Who are you calling a lady?" snarled the voice of Gerymanx from the mermaid's body. "And what kind of a fishy remark are you making about me being pisca-

torial?"

Judge Numbottom was sorry he started the whole thing.

"Can't any of you talk sense?" he begged.

"Let me help you," said Jory, from Mr. Simpkins' body. "It's very simple. You see, I used to be in that body over there."

He pointed at the wolf form now worn by Mr. Simpkins.

"You were in the body of that animal?" Judge Numbottom's eyes started from their sockets.

"Why not?" piped the wolf.

"A talking wolf?" moaned the Judge.

"Well, if it disturbs you so much," sniffed the wolf. He bent forward and began to go through contortions. It was a fascinating if repulsive spectacle. Slowly, the wolf turned into a man.

"You see?" he asked.

"I don't want to see!" groaned Judge Numbottom.

"Then look at her!" suggested Lossowitz, pointing at Trina in the body of the redheaded window dummy.

The window dummy was redheaded no longer. With a clatter, the dummy's head dropped to the floor.

"So sorry," said Trina. "Looking at a sight like that wolf is enough to make anyone lose their head."

She stooped and picked up her head slowly.

Judge Numbottom's eyes were almost resting on his cheekbones.

"It's sorcery," he sobbed. "Sheer black sorcery! And how can I press a sorcery charge at election time?"

I stepped up.

"Listen, Your Honor," I whispered. "I think I have a way to straighten this matter out. Never mind getting the story straight. I know a way to restore these people to their rightful forms. Then we can forget the whole thing."

"How?" gasped the Judge.

Briefly, I told him about Miss Terioso holding a due bill on hell. She could evoke a demon and order him to restore my friends to their rightful shapes.

"Incredible," objected the Judge.

"No more incredible than what you've seen here," I reminded him.

"Why doesn't she do it, then?" he asked.

"She's stubborn. I suggest that you force her to do it."

"How?"

"Issue a court order commanding her to evoke the demon and make the change."

The Judge sat up.

His eyes flashed fire. "I'll damned well issue the order," he snapped. "If not, I'll have the lot of you jailed for the rest of your unnatural lives."

“HAVE you got your due-bill on hell ready?” I whispered nervously, crouching next to Miss Terioso in the darkened courtroom.

“It’s right here in my satchel,” replied the witch. During the past hour her glamor had fallen away, and she was once again the familiar crone-like figure, as she puttered around making passes in the air.

Judge Numbottom had ejected the drunk, the come-on girl, and Patrolman Lossowitz from the chamber, leaving us in privacy.

A bailiff had been dispatched to secure the ingredients Miss Terioso required for the ceremony of the ritual, and now she went through the parody of the Black Mass and the moment for evoking the demon neared.

My fine finned and furry friends moved restlessly to and fro as her voice rose in awesome crescendo.

The climax came.

Amidst a shaking of walls and a rumbling of far-off vortices between the stars, the red demon slithered into tri-dimensional being in the center of Judge Numbottom’s court.

A gasp rose from the assemblage.

“To think of me, acting as an accessory in this black magic,” hissed Judge Numbottom morosely. “Oh, Lord—what’s that?”

He saw the demon.

So did my friends.

The demon stretched a rubbery red neck and blinked with nyc-taloptic eyes.

“It’s you again,” he growled, squatting near me.

I shrugged. “Not at all. This lady called you.”

I indicated Miss Terioso, who nodded. The witch swept commandingly before the creature of darkness.

In low tones she conversed with the entity.

“You want me to switch them?” the demon asked.

“Yes.”

“And you have a paper entitling you to—ah—services?”

“Here it is.”

Miss Terioso fluttered a piece of paper.

“Very well,” sighed the demon.

“Here goes.”

He paused. “I shall have to freeze them into marble again before I unscramble their psyches,” he said.

“Very well.”

“Don’t worry,” I told Trina, moving close to her. “It will just be a minute.”

That is all it took, and I was glad.

For my very spine shook at the violence of the psychic force that concentrated itself in the room.

Gazing through the phosphorescence of the chalk lines, I saw a horribly unnatural transformation.

Men, mermaid, centaur, and wolf, turned to gleaming white stone. They froze in marble attitudes on the floor.

"So," breathed the demon. He was sweating horribly, as sparks rising from his body attested.

"Now for the second step," he muttered. "But give me the due bill first."

His voice addressed the witch. But his eyes couldn't reach her.

It was I who finally located Miss Terioso in the darkness. She stood by the window, the open window, and she was already bestriding the broomstick.

"She's not going through with the deal!" I yelled. "She's double-crossing us and making a get-away!"

It was true.

The demon realized it instantly.

"Come back!" he shouted.

"Farewell!" called the witch.

She rose in midair.

The demon, like a gigantic rubber ball, bounded after her.

He soared, with dynamic propulsion, through the window.

I rushed over to the ledge and peered outside.

Hovering in midair, witch and demon clawed wildly in writhing tangle of arms and legs. She was trying to hold on to the piece of paper. He enfolded her in his red arms, hissing.

The broomstick wobbled.

SUDDENLY came a cataclysmic crash of thunder, a burst of eye-ball searing luminance, and then—nothing.

Witch and demon were gone.

"Trina," I whispered.

A lifeless window dummy stared at me with glassy eyes.

Judge Numbottom switched on the lights.

He rubbed his eyes.

"It is the order of this court," he whispered, "that these statues be confiscated. Immediately. And taken out of sight. Not a word of this must get out. You understand?"

I nodded.

"Julius Margate's house will be put up for sale under court order," he added.

"The window dummy?" I whispered.

"Will await claim by rightful owners," he told me.

And so it ended. I left Margate, his friends, and his house. And now I try to forget.

Of course, I still see the window dummy every day.

That's all I have left, you know. All I have to prove that it really happened.

So I see the window dummy every day. And you can come and see her yourself if you like.

She's the third one from the left—in our biggest department store window.

John Novasmith found nothing familiar on Earth when he returned from Mars. What about his memories? Was it amnesia? Or was he actually—

The Man With Two Lives

by

Daniel F. Galouye

“TAYLOR Boulevard?” The old timer scratched his chin thoughtfully and plucked at his suspenders. “Ain’t no Taylor Boulevard. Not in Canton, there ain’t.”

He looked stiffly at me and there was a dogged finality in the lines of his face, half hidden by gray stubble.

A cold hand of confused apprehension clutched at me. There *had* to be a Taylor Boulevard! It was the street I was born on—the one on which my family had lived for more than twenty years.

I glanced up at the street name on the lamp post. It read “Williams Avenue.” I looked back at him with a determination that matched his. “This used to be Taylor. When did they change it?”

He laughed, but not without annoyance. “Sixty-six years I lived here. Sixty-six years it’s been Williams.”

First there had been a Canton that wasn’t at all like the town I remembered. When I was a kid I used to play on the neutral ground of a four-lane main street. Now there was a central square flanked by a courthouse and post office. And in the square was a statue mellow with patina. Its inscription dated it as having been placed there more than thirty years before I was born.

Now—

“This is crazy!” I muttered.

“Eh?”

I hadn’t realized he was still listening.

“I mean, right at the end of this block is the house where I was born.” I pointed.

But my finger extended toward one of those decrepit anachronisms that can be found in most small towns, even if they are located within hopping distance of big cities . . . a gasoline station, pre-



served more for its historic interest than for any other reason. It was immediately apparent that that structure, too, outdated me—by at least seventy-five years.

I leaned against the lamp post and closed my eyes. I was shaking worse than a starboard-heavy tanker in the aerodynamic phase of blastoff. But 'I wasn't sick—at least, it wasn't any kind of sickness I'd ever heard about or experienced prior to the past few days.

When I looked up, the old man was walking away, shaking his head sympathetically.

All around were paradoxes and enigmas—an impossible, frightening world that seemed to be motivated only by the derisive intention of shutting me off; of stripping me of my identity with things, places, people which had, until now, been a solid part of my past.

Still trembling from the sickening attack of nerves, I walked unsteadily back to the Manor Hotel. Only when I had been in Canton last, three years ago, it was the Stanton Hotel. And it had been a three-story structure located on Main and Fourth. Now it had only two floors and was sitting mockingly on Main and Avenue C.

In the lobby, I took a video-phone book from the booth and dropped numbly into a chair. I

thumbed through it, looking for names—familiar names, ones that stood out so in my memory, by virtue of their oddness, that they could never be forgotten in a lifetime of lifetimes. I hunted for Pfastoff and O'Magillicutty and L'Amour and Franissiviev.

But I found only Smiths and Johnsons and Watsons and Upchurches. Despairingly, I let the book drop in my lap. The directory was a completely alien list of persons—as alien as though it had come from another town.

For the tenth time since I had arrived that morning, I opened the book to the W's and looked for Edgar Watley, attorney at law . . . No such person was listed.

Somehow I felt it was Edgar Watley who was responsible for everything. Perhaps that was because there was no other name readily available to accept the blame. Or maybe it was because only a month ago he had sent this space-o-gram to Marsport:

"John Novasmith: My sad duty to inform you Uncle Morgan killed in crash. Necessary you return for settlement of estate."

I hadn't even known there was an Uncle Morgan.

But—no Edgar Watley. No Uncle Morgan. No lifetime acquaintances. And only a piecemeal reproduction of a once-familiar

Canton.

My eyes were focused absently on the registration desk as I considered the utterly impossible experience. I watched the large stout man speak with the clerk, only half seeing them.

That I was *not* amnesic I was certain. Victims of amnesia forget things. They don't come up with an entire new set of fantastic memories to replace the lost ones.

Clutching at the past, I tried firmly to reassure myself of the facts by repeating them over and over in my mind:

I was John Novasmith; aged twenty-nine. I had lived in Canton until I was eighteen. I had gone off to school and to work in the city and had visited home almost every week end—it was only a hundred and fifty miles away—until I was twenty-six. In that year my father and mother had died and I had accepted the clerical position in Marsport.

There was no uncertainty. My identity was a concrete actuality. But, as far as everyone else in Canton was concerned, there was no such person as Novasmith. They were rejecting me as thoroughly as I was trying to force them to accept me. Only, they had the chameleonic evidence of the altered town to back up their viewpoint.

THE stout man at the desk turned and smiled amicably and went out into the street. For a moment, his face had seemed familiar. I laughed hollowly . . . one apparently familiar face in surroundings which presented nothing else of an intimate nature.

I went back into the videophone booth and dialed a number I had already dialed three times since arriving only hours earlier.

"Vital Statistics," the man who appeared on the screen announced. Then he looked up and saw me. "Oh, you again?"

"Are you certain you have no records on John Novasmith Junior?" I pleaded.

He counted the answers off on his fingers. "No John Novasmith Junior was born here. None ever lived here. No John Novasmith Senior ever married a Margaret Dunning. There was never any big white house on the corner of 'Taylor' and Avenue N. And five," he gripped his thumb irately, "why don't you go see a psychiatrist and quit bothering me?"

The screen went dead.

Again, I clung to the door of the booth, shaking violently as the inexplicable nervous reaction set in. A psychiatrist?—Nobody could ever convince me my trouble was mental. A doctor? — Perhaps. Pretty soon *something* would have

to explain what was wrong with me physically—why my nervous system seemed to be strung a couple of octaves higher since leaving Marsport.

I waited until the attack subsided. Then, with the zest of a zombi, I started up to my room, wondering whether I would ever be able to solve the impossible enigma. If only I could go back to Mars and forget I had ever taken a trip to Earth! I could pretend the space-o-gram had never arrived. I could imagine I had never left my job . . . But, could I resume my established life there—knowing that all my memories of the past were invalid ones?

Perhaps at that point I might have decided on withdrawing from the chaotic confusion of Canton. I might have attributed all the manifestations to some mental quirk and tried to forget them. But there was one irrefutable bit of evidence that couldn't be erased, no matter what was happening to all the other memories—the space-o-gram.

I took it from my pocket and reread it as I stood in front of my door. It represented an entire vista of undeniable facts:

Someone wanted me to return to Canton. That someone knew what would happen to me when I got there—wanted it to happen. Therefore, there was some explicable or-

der in all the chaos. And there was a purpose behind everything.

Crossing the threshold, my foot kicked a newspaper which had been slipped under the door—a final edition of the City Press, flown down to Canton by truck-copter. I knew. I used to deliver them after school.

Seizing the opportunity to shut the puzzle out of my mind for a few minutes, I sat on the bed and read the main headline:

U. S.- French Row
Over Ceres Goes
To World Council

But that had happened more than three years ago—before I had left for Mars! The dispute, I remembered, had been settled by the council and the asteroid had been awarded to the United States.

I glanced at the dateline. Someone had put a three-year-old City Press in my room. As I looked again, I could see that the pages were yellow with age.

Frowning in confusion over the origin of the paper, I spread the front page open on the bed. A large headline, story and pictures occupied all the space below the fold. The black type announced:

*Schutten Convicted of
Murders; Faces Death*

But my eyes leaped to the pictures of the killer—rogues' gallery shots showing profile and full

views of the face—and the ten fingerprints underneath; the accompanying data on physical characteristics.

Schutten, Al, was twenty-six. I had been twenty-six three years ago. He had blond, wavy hair—like mine. He was six, one and weighed one eighty-five. That was my height and only a little under my weight. Blue eyes—like me. Pencil scar along his left cheekbone. I fingered the scar along my left cheekbone. Bullet wound, right shoulder. Briefly, I thought of the hunting accident in which I suffered a bullet wound in my right shoulder.

It might have been an hour later before it happened, but finally the paper dropped to the floor. Eventually, I retrieved it and read his other distinguishing characteristics: Mole on the back of his neck; tattoo of space ship on left forearm; birth mark, right arm-pit . . . They all applied to me too.

And a casual glance would have convinced anyone the pictures were of me.

TOO numb to think rationally, I ordered a fifth of bourbon and mixers to go with it from the bar downstairs. I let the revelation seep down into a substratum of consciousness so that it wouldn't deafen me with its shouted insist-

ence for consideration; so that it would be available for recall and explanation when I was in saner control of myself.

There was still just the barest shade of a doubt, I tried to make myself believe. Identical features and characteristics might be possible on a million to one shot, I told myself over and over again. Then too, there was the basically underlying realization that I wasn't a killer, wouldn't ever be one and therefore couldn't logically have ever been one.

I spread the paper on the writing desk. With a handkerchief soaked in ink, I smeared my fingertips and carefully pressed them against a sheet of plain bond paper with the letterhead of the hotel on it.

Admittedly, I'm no fingerprint expert. But it didn't require one to recognize that the prints under the picture of the killer Al Schutten and mine were the same.

Lunging up with the impact of unimpeachable conviction, I turned over the bottle of ink and stood shaking in the center of the room, the symptoms of unbridled nerves running away with me.

If my memories were false, which the events of the day had irrefutably proven them to be, then the likelihood existed that my past might well be comprised of

another series of events which I *didn't* remember. It seemed inevitable now that those hidden memories would prove to belong to Al Schutten.

Schutten had murdered . . . I glanced hastily at the story on the front page—three men, two policemen and a teller during a bank robbery . . . and had been convicted of the murders. But, sometime after the paper announcing his conviction had been printed, he had escaped.

Had he submitted himself to some mental treatment to make him forget what he had done? Had he gone to Mars where he might be able to avoid capture under that planet's lax system of police enforcement?

But *someone*, with a fraudulent space-o-gram, had drawn me back here; had tricked me into returning. Why would somebody want me to believe, falsely or correctly, that I was Al Schutten?

The bellboy arriving with the bourbon was like a space-rescue boat coming to snatch me off a disabled ship drifting sunward. But even five straight whiskeys did nothing to quell the nervous reaction that was hitting me now like a thousand-volt electric probe.

There were too many answers that had to be supplied; too many riddles to solve—starting a month

back with a message delivered in Marsport and . . .

Memories of the long space journey flicked across my consciousness . . . passengers—one in particular—a tall, stout man with a red face. The *same man* who only minutes ago had stood talking with the desk clerk!

Coincidence that the man should be here? Not by a million to one odds. Not even by stretching the odds to a billion to one could I admit that he had coincidentally taken the same ship to earth; the same shuttle rocket to the city where I landed; the same heli cab to Canton; had registered in the same hotel.

A chill of detached fear became a desperate throbbing in my head. If I was a killer who had been sentenced to death and hadn't died, they'd be looking for me to carry out the death sentence! And they wouldn't listen to any complaints I might have on the inadequacies of my memory. They'd let themselves be governed only by the evidence of identity.

I had to get away. I had to get back to the relative security of Mars. I had to do something!

But, pacing the room frantically, I realized that I also *had* to know definitely whether I *was* Al Schutten, or whether it was some intricate trick of cosmic proportions.

And the man from Mars? Was he a policeman? I smiled grimly. It wasn't likely. He would have arrested me already. Then he could only be implicated in some other fashion. I had to find him.

Stumbling down the steps, I raced up to the desk.

"That man who was talking with you when I was in the chair—where is he?"

"He checked out, sir. The hotel station wagon drove him to the helicah terminal. He's already gone back to the city."

"Where can I find him? Who is he?"

The clerk dug down into the file; came up with a card.

"He filled in the address blank with the word 'itinerant.' His name is Al Schutten."

OUTSIDE, the crisp cool air did little to rescue me from a mental and physical near paralysis. Unaware of my actions, I sat clumsily on the main steps of the hotel, the nervous reaction twisting my stomach into knots, spinning my head like the main gyro of a fifty-thousand ton spacer.

It was dark and the nearby street lights and neon signs were like fuzzy, distant stars and nebulae. The sounds were from another universe.

Al Schutten . . . Al Schutten

was Al Schutten. I was Al Schutten. The man from Mars was Al Schutten. I fought a hysterical impulse to stop the next person who came by, and the next, and the next—to ask them all if they were Al Schuttens too. And I had a vague suspicion that the old timer who had dehunked my concept of Taylor Boulevard must have, at some time in his life if not now, been an Al Schutten too.

I rose limply and started walking aimlessly down the street. One thing was quite apparent: The Al Schutten from Mars, the one who had trailed the Al Schutten who was really John Novasmith, was gone. . . gone with his insane tricks, however he performed them. If I had had a chance of turning the mad world of unreality into something resembling normalcy, it was gone now—gone with the disappearance of the tall, stout man.

Crossing a street, I barely avoided being hit by a car. But the near accident made no appreciable impression on me—nor did the irate shouts of the driver.

If I was going to find out why there were three Al Schuttens; why this particular one was really John Novasmith, but a John Novasmith with ridiculously false memory impressions; why a murderer had gone free—it was pretty much apparent that I would have to decide

on some approach other than collaring a tall, stout Al Schutten and beating the information from him.

Ahead, a large illuminated globe on a bronze light standard silhouetted the letters "Library." I seemed to sense that I might make a start here without knowing exactly what it might be. Then I remembered the paper from three years ago. There would be other issues—in a file. The subsequent ones would tell of Al Schutten's escape.

If I learned how he got free, or the names of persons who might have been involved unintentionally in the escape, I might be able to figure out a starting point.

Five minutes later, I was seated at a table with the bound June, 2128, copies of the City Press spread open before me.

The June 28th edition carried an interview with Al Schutten three nights before the execution. Whoever this Schutten had been before he became me, he certainly must have sweated it out . . . Nothing about him on either June 29th or June 30th.

I got out the July file. No escape on the day of the execution, July 1, had been reported. Damned if he hadn't sweated it out until the last minute practically.

Turning to the next day's copy, I read the bold, black headline at

the top of the page:

KILLER SCHUTTEN DIES IN CHAIR

TWO eternities later a hand tapped me on the shoulder and a far away voice told me the library was closing for the night. I had no memory of leaving the building.

The next incident of awareness came as I sat paralyzed on a bench in the square. Slowly—as the years crept by, it seemed—the capacity for rational thought returned.

I was Al Schutten who had turned into John Novasmith who had found out he was Al Schutten who couldn't have lived to become John Novasmith because he had died in the electric chair three years ago.

At some point during that initial period of personal hell I must have screamed. For someone came up and asked whether I was ill. I shook my head and hastily moved from the square when I saw the official badge on his lapel, not then realizing that the police wouldn't be looking for Al Schutten any longer.

However you looked at it, it was my own personal problem now. Not even authorities, who otherwise might have arrested me as an escaped murderer, would have an

explanation to come up with.

I was walking toward the helicab terminal when it happened.

"Damned Ethel!" I exclaimed vehemently, feeling the sneer on my face as I said it. "I'll kill her!"

I started and drew up sharply, putting out a hand to prop myself against a building. But, as I shifted my weight to lean, the hand went back down and I fell roughly against the bricks.

Confused, I looked suspiciously at the arm that had decided not to stay outstretched. Then my attention bolted back to the words I had spoken.

I was quite sure I didn't want to kill—again. I was unswervingly certain I didn't want to kill anyone named Ethel . . . I didn't know anyone by that name.

The suspect hand came up to scratch my chin. That would have been unobjectionable—except that I was entertaining no intention of scratching my chin at the moment.

I jerked it down. It came up again. I pulled it away from my face abruptly and thrust it in my pocket, too absorbed in the novelty of the occurrence to be afraid.

But slowly, the hand started to withdraw itself. I forced it back. It came up. Angrily, I rammed it into the pocket.

Suddenly the pressure that was drawing it out relaxed and the

fist thrust down with the force of a punch, ripping the material of the trousers.

Dumfounded over the hand that wouldn't do what I wanted it to, I crept slowly down the street, as though removing myself from the spot would eliminate the nightmarish events that were engulfing me like a wave of inexplicable horror.

My other hand came up in a swift, sly movement that caught me off guard and scratched my chin.

"Bradley too!" I shot out a vile oath. "Ethel first, then Bradley!"

I jolted, too stupefied to let the scream tear from my throat; too panic-stricken to move.

THREE Al Schuttens . . . A voice that wasn't mine, but that still issued from my mouth in malicious dedication. A hand that fought itself. A man dead three years, walking around and wondering how he happened to be somebody else—alive. Memories that wouldn't hold water when put to the test.

The night was cool, but perspiration was a warm, sticky film that covered my face. I laughed hysterically. Or, was it someone else who laughed through my mouth?

Then I had the answer . . . I'd

killed three people and I'd gone insane. But they hadn't executed me—yet. And this entire nightmarish existence was a feverish phantasmagoria—the ravings of a mind driven mad by the imminence of destruction.

Suddenly I had the feeling that if I threw my arm out it might strike steel bars and the startling sensation would awaken me. Then I was desperately hoping that I *would* awaken and find that the threat to my sanity was nothing more formidable than steel bars.

Cringing in the shadow of the building, I waited for the voice to come again; for the hand to begin another independent movement. I waited breathlessly knowing that perhaps the mere occurrence that I dreaded might strip away the final shreds of rational control.

But the hand remained still. I moved it, waving it in unison with the other in a grim semblance of a gymnastic exercise. But there was no interruption. I walked in a small circle. No countermotion interrupted. I recited a silly nursery rhyme. No voice broke in with threats of murder.

Proverb has it that time dulls all things. And now it was dulling the memory of the fantastic occurrences of only a few minutes earlier. Had I really experienced the voice, the surreptitious antics of

the hand? Or was it just another manifestation in the series of incredible events that had begun only hours before when cold reality had first started to strip away remembered facts with derisive relentlessness?

Confused beyond rationality, I started again for the helical terminal. My thoughts were a stripped gear remaining motionless against its shaft while the rest of the mechanical linkage whirled on concernedly. The enigma of voice within voice held me in a hypnotic grip.

Abruptly I realized I was walking eagerly toward the terminal—much more avidly than would be expected of a man as stupefied as I.

Was there something else identified with John Novasmith—with the ghost of Al Schutten? The First—that was anxious to return to the city too . . . something that spoke of killing an Ethel and a Bradley?

Purposefully, I slowed my pace.

But, without having been conscious of increasing it again, I realized I was walking in an anxious stride as I arrived at the terminal.

NOW, I have never been a drinking man. An occasional scotch and soda or a bourbon with water at social functions before I

left earth; a Desert Delight or two on Marsday nights (there are eight days in the Martian week)—that was my limit.

So, buying a fifth of whiskey in the Canton hotel was somewhat out of character, however excusably so under the circumstances. But ordering a second fifth—after checking in somewhat distraughtly at the hotel in the city that night—was cause for introspection.

Of course, it might be possible that I was reacting to the assumption that it was natural for a man in my condition to seek release in drunkenness. But it was also possible, I had to admit, that if something in me—a person, spirit, or state of mind—wanted to kill an Ethel and a Bradley, it might also want whiskey, either through habit or for its courage-kindling properties.

Sitting on the bed in the room, I poured another drink and tossed it down without hesitating. I sloshed the liquid around in the bottle, now three-quarters empty . . . Three-quarters empty—I started. I had drunk that much without feeling it?

Setting the bottle on the floor, I rose to test my reactions. And, from within me, rose a wave of warm, pleasant giddiness. My head was light and my nerves calm. And, I realized, I hadn't experienced the

uncontrollable trembling reaction at all in the full hour since I had ordered the whiskey.

After two more drinks, there was only abandon and unconcern over what had only a short while earlier loomed as a predicament. Laughing, I went over to the window, reassuring myself that actually I didn't give a damn what happened.

I drank again then started across the room, stumbling over a chair and reeling the rest of the way to the dresser, rather happy about the whole thing.

"You're drunk, John Novasmith," I accused, chuckling as I tried to focus my eyes on the reflected image.

The laugh echoed. "Drunk as hell. But on you it stands out like green eyeballs. When was the last time you had anything stronger than a Venusian Veil?"

I hesitated, put my finger pensively to my mouth. "Now, let's see—"

But I stiffened and backed away from the mirror. I wasn't talking to myself. It wasn't intoxication that was making me ask myself questions. Even despite the inebriation, I know that *something else was talking to me!*

"Let's get another drink," said the something else casually. I screamed.

My hand clamped itself over my

mouth roughly. It was more of a slap than a gesture to stop the outcry.

"Shut up, dammit!" the else-thing ordered gruffly when the hand fell back down. "You want to get us thrown out?"

"Oh, God!" I exclaimed despairingly, crossing over to the table in actions that I hadn't directed.

Stupefied, I watched my hands pour a drink, raise it to my mouth.

But I twisted my head away. "No! No!"

A vise clamped around my neck and rim of the glass found my lips.

"Don't!" I pleaded. "Don't—"

MY head snapped back and the whiskey rushed down my throat, mingling with words on the way out. I coughed and gagged and spat. *

"Don't do that again!" My own voice threatened me. "Not when I want a drink!"

Terror finally groped its way down to my legs. I ran for the door. But, before I got half way across the room, I stopped and stood wavering.

I opened my mouth to scream again. But my hand clamped itself over my lips. I pulled it away. My other hand shot up to cover my mouth. I struggled to shake it off, but couldn't.

When I finally lost interest in

the scream, I was standing back by the table. Slowly, the hand freed my face.

Laughter of amusement welled in my throat. But there was no laughter in my mind—only panic, a numb sort of panic that left me with the sensations of total paralysis, even though my hands were unconcernedly busy with the bottle and glass.

"What—who—?" I stammered between drinks.

"Don't get yourself in an uproar," the something else answered calmly, laughing again. "So they gave you the name John Novasmith?"

Oh, hell! I was rotten drunk. That was it. Some people see things that aren't there. Others cry for no reason at all. Some do nonsensical things they can't remember. My peculiar reaction was to imagine that I had gone back to Earth and had discovered my memory was false and had learned that I and two other persons were Al Schutten and had started talking to myself. It was all as uncomplicated as that.

"John Novasmith," I heard myself muse aloud. "Novasmith—Nova. Not a bad idea at all. Get it? Nova—new—nova."

I laughed again.

"What you been doing for the past three years?" the other

me asked.

But before I could answer—either in protest or in indulgence—my hand pulled the passport from my pocket and held it before me.

"Clerical position, Mars Mines, Inc.," this other voice said. "They said it would be far away. Boy, they weren't kidding!"

Finally, my mind formed a rational question. Meekly, I uttered it. "What—who are you?"

"Al Schutten."

ODDLY, I wasn't as sick as I had expected to be when I awoke in the morning. There was a hangover, of course, but not the nauseating kind that keeps you trudging between the bedroom and the bathroom for the better part of the day.

While I waited for breakfast to be brought up, I purposefully kept my thoughts from wandering back to the events of the past day and night.

I hadn't yet decided how to accept them in the light of the new, bright day that stood outside the window like the tailblast of a Jupiter-bound liner. I hadn't even attempted yet to weigh the incredible experiences of the night against the possibility of their being alcohol-spawned hallucinations. And dispensing with the incredibilities of the night would

have to come before any attempt to explain away the false memories.

As I tied my tie, I paused to look suspiciously into the mirror, summoning a question for the reflection, but feeling too silly to utter it.

Abruptly the cheerfulness of the day outside burst into my harassed thoughts. I was sure of one thing: Al Schutten had been executed for the murders of which he had been convicted. Even if I were a new Al Schutten named John Novasmith with a false memory, there was nothing now to keep me from going to authorities and asking aid in solving the riddle of myself.

With my fears somewhat alleviated over the prospect of receiving help where before everything had appeared hopeless, I ate heartily. There had to be some explanation. Soon I would either know what it was, or it would be somebody else's responsibility to figure it out.

I finished the cup of coffee, put on my coat and turned to leave.

The door opened and Al Schutten walked in, closing it behind him. This Al Schutten was the man from Mars—the one who had registered at the hotel in Canton and had left before I could find him.

"Al?" he said tentatively, staring expectantly at me.

All the confusion and insanity that I had shrugged off only a moment earlier surged back in on me.

I wanted to grab him by the collar and say, "Okay, buddy, let's have your story."

But I only stood there paralyzed by the fear of the arrogantly unknown; the incorrigible realization that the man I *had* to find, that man who had eluded me in the hotel—over millions of miles of space—was now standing here before me.

He saw the confusion on my face and frowned hesitantly. "You are Al now, aren't you?"

Forcibly shaking off the stupor, I started toward him. "What do you want?" I demanded. "Who—?"

"Okay, Al," he said angrily, "Come off it. I know it's you. I listened through the door last night when you were drinking. But I thought I'd let you sober up first."

I felt a sigh fill my chest. "All right, Powers," my other voice uttered resignedly. "It's me."

Someone had opened the floodgates of insanity again and my mind was almost swamped.

"That's better." The tall, stout Al Schutten who had suddenly resolved into a man named Powers relaxed. But he stiffened again im-

mediately. "You in control? You can handle him?"

"I can handle him all right," assured my second voice.

Somewhere, a million miles off in space it seemed, a detached mentality named John Novasmith impersonally watched the scene in the hotel room; listened to two voices, one of which was his own; smelled the smells of the room, heard its sounds.

Too stupefied to interrupt, I mentally stood aside, feeling much like a child who had been told to be quiet while adults were speaking.

Under direction from the other me, I inspected the empty bottle and tossed it in the waste basket while Powers came to stand beside me.

"How did you know I wasn't executed?" asked the hidden me.

"I didn't," Powers answered. "Not until a year ago."

"Then they haven't told anybody?"

"It's still in the experimental stage."

It was stupidly, fantastically, impossibly illogical . . . me standing aside and listening while another me talked personally with a man I had never heard of before.

"Listen," I began, seizing control of my own voice, "I want to—"

"Shut up, sonny!" I commanded myself irately. "You keep out of this."

I shut up. I didn't see how I could do otherwise. After all, I reminded myself with a frustrating sense of helplessness, this Al Schutten, if it was Al Schutten who was in control of me and if he hadn't been executed, was *actually* twenty-nine years old. I—the person whose memories were valid only for the past three years—could be no more than three years old.

"You sent the space-o-gram?" I asked Powers, knowing my mind hadn't originated the question.

"I sent it—from Marsport. Made it look like it came from here."

"Why?"

"I wanted to be close to you all the time in case you should start coming back—up here." Powers tapped his temple.

"I mean why did you send it?"

"I knew that if I got you in familiar surroundings you'd start coming back. Lanking said so. He was the one who told me about the negative compulsion that kept you—John Novasmith—from coming back here to find out that his ideas of the past were all screwed up."

"Who's Lanking?"

"He works at the clinic. It was his idea to get you back. He came

to me with it and I thought it was a pretty good idea."

THERE were a hundred questions of my own that I wanted to interject. But any attempt I might make to interrupt would only be resisted. Anyway, I seemed to be indirectly learning some of the fuzzy edges by just listening.

But I could sense that I was becoming impatient—this other me that was talking with Powers.

"Look," I heard myself say irately, "I *know* you. You wouldn't even bring your mother back to life just because you felt sorry for her. Why did you go to all this trouble?"

"Al!" Powers exclaimed, hurt. "You're *my friend*! You're—"

"Why did you sign my name on the hotel register?"

"Lanking said a trick like that might help to bring you back. He said that if the newspaper trick didn't work, I might try hitting you with an—an inconsistency. I was going to call you up at the hotel and tell you to check the register. Lanking said you'd—revolt inwardly in protest over someone else claiming your identity. He said that might be the thing to re-establish the last link."

"It was." I heard myself laugh again. "Of course, I had been coming around little by little ever

since Novasmith read the paper."

"Let's get out of here," Powers said, turning for the door. "Some of the boys—"

But my hand reached out and caught his sleeve, twisted it. "I got a better idea. Let's you tell me why you brought me back." I realized I was breathing heavily into his face.

"Okay," Powers said finally, shrugging. "The money. The money you got in the bank job. You hid it somewhere."

I smiled. "And you want me to tell you where it is—right, big-hearted?"

Powers swore. "That's a helluva kind of thanks I get for bringing you back from the dead. Of course I want the money! And it's a damned small price to pay for— for resurrection."

"Small price? I give you the money and spend the rest of my life fighting this— this Novasmith whenever I want to do something?"

"It won't be like that," Powers assured. "There's a way. Lanking said so. He said we can cure you. He said that just like they killed you, they can kill John Novasmith."

"I came back, didn't I?"

"But it's different now, Al," Powers was beginning to perspire. "They've changed all that. Anybody who gets the works can't

come back any more. With you, they were just experimenting."

I could feel my face smiling. "Okay," I said. "The money for the treatment. You sure this Lanking can do it?"

I walked closer to Powers.

"Of course he can," Powers began. "He's been working with them since—"

I felt my fist shoot out and catch him full on the chin. He dropped in a clumsy heap at my feet.

AND just when I was beginning to become familiar with enough of the skeleton of the thing to start putting meat on the bones.

"Why did you do that" I—the real me—asked.

"Can't trust Powers in the next room," the other me explained. "Come on. Let's go."

Something forced me to kneel and reach into Powers' pocket where I found a small silencer-equipped revolver. I transferred it to my own pocket.

"He's always got an angle," my somewhat throatier voice said. "And it ain't never any good for the other guy. Maybe he can cure me. But that can wait. I know where to find him when I'm ready for the cure."

Somehow I was actually accept-

ing the incredible position of sharing 'one throat, one set of arms, one set of legs with another. It was either accept it or go crazy on the spot.

"You *are* Al Schutten?" I asked.

I nodded in the affirmative as we stepped out in the hall and went toward the elevator.

"But how—? I began.

He put a finger to our lips as the elevator door opened. "Let's don't go around talking to ourself."

Through the lobby and into the street I followed, numbly offering no resistance.

But I drew up sharply on the sidewalk, defying any attempt to take another step.

"I'm not going anywhere," I said.

"The hell you're not!"

Three persons turned to stare as they passed. An elderly woman shook her head pityingly.

There was a cop across the street. I smiled in victory.

"I wouldn't do that." Something stayed my foot as I tried to step off toward the officer. "There's still that thing you read about—the three murders."

"You're not scaring me with an execution," I said defiantly. "You've already been killed—maybe not physically. But you're dead as far as they're concerned."

I imagined I was doing a pretty good job of using knowledge that I didn't have to call his bluff.

But a deep laugh answered me. "Okay, brain boy. So they didn't really kill me. But I'm supposed to be dead and I'm still alive and they don't know it. If they find out, don't kid yourself into thinking they won't do something about it—like an execution that'll stick this time."

I had no answer. Anyway, two persons had stopped to watch me as I stood in a stiff half-crouch against the wall. It seemed wiser now to forego conversation.

"Coming?" I asked myself contemptuously.

"Where?" I whispered tentatively, guiltily watching the onlookers and the policeman.

He didn't answer. Instead, he wrenched my body off balance; recovered before we toppled, and started walking toward a cab at the curb down the block.

But I stiffened and froze my legs so he couldn't move them. Three more pedestrians stopped to watch.

"Suit yourself, sonny," he said. "I could have it out with you right now. I'm a helluva lot stronger. But there's an easier way. I'll let *you* take *me* where I want to go . . . Apartment C, Three-Oh-Eight Forty-Seventh—you might find out more about yourself there."

Abruptly, my entire body seemed to relax. It was as though I could feel him withdrawing control. He had released me completely—but for how long?

The policeman started over.

Behind me—in the hotel—was Powers. He could explain it possibly. But he might not be feeling very cordial toward Al Schutten at the moment.

Casually, I turned and walked away before the approaching cop, trying to force normalcy into my motions. Now, the cab represented escape from an embarrassing position. I reached it and entered.

"Where to, mister?" the driver asked.

And, while I hesitated, trying to think of some logical place to go, I heard the other half of me answer, "Three-Oh-Eight Forty Seventh."

TEN minutes later we were still riding through heavy traffic. Al Schutten hadn't said a word; hadn't stirred.

"Hey," I whispered, again feeling silly as hell.

No answer.

"Schutten," I called a little louder.

"Sir?" the driver punched in the autocontrol stud and turned around.

"Nothing," I said aloud, slump-

ing in the seat.

He stared at me a moment then turned forward again.

For some reason Schutten was determined to remain silent. And, vaguely, I imagined I could understand why. Schutten hated me. I could feel it with a conviction. Just like you'd be averse to talking with someone who had taken something away from you—your wife, for instance—he was indignantly opposed to having anything to do with me unless he had to.

I started to give the driver a new address to see what would happen. But, somehow, I shrank from the prospect of having to struggle with him again.

My thoughts were not open to him—that much seemed certain. If they were, he would respond whenever I thought of opposing him.

I calmly tried to wade through the fantasy; to rationalize all the impossibilities. There was a John Novasmith. And, before him, there had been an Al Schutten. Al Schutten had committed three murders. And everybody thought there had been an execution. But Schutten had not died. Instead, I had come into being. Then Schutten had come back. Why? Had somebody, like a ghoul, stolen the dead killer and revived him; subjected him to some treatment to turn him into . . . Hell, I couldn't

figure it out. I gave up.

The cab turned right abruptly and pulled up in front of a large building numbered Three-Oh-Eight. "I might find out more about myself here," Schutten had said.

But still I hesitated, even when the driver held the door open. Schutten, however, grabbed the strap and pulled me out onto the sidewalk; paid the driver out of my pocket.

He tried to take a step toward the building after the cab left. But I stopped him.

We struggled for control of the leg. He won. Then we fought over the next step.

"Give in, kid," he said finally.

"Like hell!" I answered firmly. "Not until I know who—what I am; how I—"

"Come on along and find out," he suggested.

I planted my feet more determinedly on the sidewalk; tensed my muscles to make certain he couldn't seize control of them.

"Look, sonny," he said condescendingly, yet vehemently, "you've never run across a killer before. Not a real one. Be smart. Get scared."

Adamantly, I made my limbs even more rigid.

But I had forgotten about my jaw. My mouth opened an inch and, when my teeth clamped toge-

ther again, there was a fold of my cheek in between them. Blood flowed over my gums, my tongue.

I fought to release the flesh and rid myself of the torture. But I learned something the ordinary person doesn't realize: The muscles that close the jaw are about ten times more powerful than the ones that open it.

Eventually, my jaw relaxed. But, as it did, my right heel came up and stomped viciously down on the instep of my left foot.

Shouting and with blood coming from my lips, I struggled to keep my feet still. But my right hand caught the little finger of my left and bent it backward—backward.

"Painful?" I heard myself say with mock solicitude. "It hurts me too, but not as much. I'm harder than you—up here . . ." I released my finger and tapped my temple. "Where Bradley says the impulses of pain are interpreted . . . Coming?"

Despairingly, I gave in. Schutten wasn't only a killer. He was viciously cruel—sadistically insane. And there was no way I could fight him.

INSIDE the building, we waited at the door of Apartment C, neither of us saying anything.

Finally the door opened.

She was brunette, well-built,

about twenty-five and small. But there was nothing small about her scream.

We pushed her back in before us and closed the door.

"Al!" she exclaimed, incredible surprise rather than fear leaping from her eyes. "You're back!—It is Al, isn't it?"

"Yeah," he said in a half sneer. "It's Al."

I wasn't going to interfere—not only because I was afraid of what he might do to me, but also because I wanted to wait and see what would happen, how many more of the secrets might unfold in the conversation.

"But—" she stammered. "But it's impossible! They said you *couldn't* come back! They said—"

"That you had nothing to worry about? That you could sleep peacefully and forget about me turning up again?"

I could almost feel his fury coursing through my body like the burning serum of an anti-zathéria shot.

She backed away until she reached a wall and stood trembling. Schutten—Schutten and I, rather—followed, our hands on our hips.

"Sorry," he said sarcastically. "Sorry it couldn't work out that way, Ethel."

Ethel! Schutten's first words had been a threat to kill Ethel.

And he was here now. An insane criminal with a gun in his pocket!

I started to bolt into frantic action. But I stopped myself. Not now. If I acted prematurely it might only warn him. I wasn't completely cowered. It might make him more determined.

* But there was no more fear on the girl's face. Now I could see how attractive it was. And I wondered how it was impressing the other half of the schizophrenic that was me. I found out soon enough.

"I'm going to kill you, Ethel," he said emotionlessly.

Calmly, she looked at the floor. "I knew you would—when I opened the door and saw you standing there."

She was resigned to dying. And still she stood without fear on her face. I wanted to reach out and touch her shoulder sympathetically. I wanted to say . . . what?—"Don't worry, miss, I'll save you?"

Then I wanted to laugh. For a moment the threat of insanity lunged back at me. I was going to save a girl from myself. It was so insane that it had a sobering effect.

"Why did you do it, Ethel?" Schutten demanded remorsefully. "Why did you call the cops?"

"I loved you, Al," she said evasively. "I still love you. That's why I really don't care if you kill me. It hasn't been easy these three years

—knowing my husband was still alive but that I could never see him; that just the sight of me might turn him back into a killer.”

Schutten laughed. “You didn’t love me! The minute I came here, with a slug in my shoulder, you called the police.”

She looked up at him listlessly. “You came back home and told me you robbed a bank. You were almost unconscious. I called the police *before* you told me you’d killed three men. But even learning you were a murderer didn’t make me stop loving you.”

“Like hell it didn’t!” he shouted. “You didn’t even love me to begin with. You only knew me a few months.”

“You’d never understand, Al. You’d never understand how a woman falls in love.”

Her head bent forward and a flounce of hair came down to hide half of her features.

He didn’t say anything.

“Go on, Al,” she urged sullenly. “Kill me. If you don’t I’m going to call Bradley’s Clinic.”

SHE turned her back. Was she humoring him in some unobtrusive way? Did she know he was a chronic killer—a maze of mad-dened revenge savoring final victory before claiming it?

Hesitatingly, Schutten stood be-

hind her, his fists clenched, the feel of the cold revolver heavy in my pocket. Tensely, I waited.

Then, suddenly, a missing piece seemed to fall into place in the insolvable puzzle. Bradley—Bradley’s Clinic . . . they both struck a familiar note and I pushed my mind for the association. Then I remembered where I had heard the words. Bradley and the Clinic were widely known. There were newspapers even on Mars. The clinic was a psychiatric institution for the treatment of the criminal mind. It was located in this city. It worked in close cooperation with the state, using habitual convicts, mostly lifetermers, as guinea pigs.

“You knew what Bradley was doing to me?” Schutten asked before I could contribute further thought to the engima.

“I knew. He said the state required my consent as the nearest of kin. I gave it. At least, the likeness of you would still be alive.”

“It’s been hell!” he shouted in anguish. “Bradley doesn’t *really* kill the ego. He just locks it up so it can never express itself. But I was there, Ethel! I was there all the time—just a bundle of thoughts that couldn’t act; like a man in a coma; like a paralyzed man buried alive!”

“It’s different now,” she said.

"The way they do it now doesn't leave even the—thoughts."

He must have interpreted her word as reflecting indifference. I could feel the rage with which he was trembling.

Abruptly, before I was aware of the action, the gun was in his hand and he was leveling it at her back. I could feel his finger squeezing the trigger.

I jerked the arm up.

The gun barked faintly and the slug tore through the ceiling.

Ethel turned, saw the weapon and fainted.

Then I was struggling with a tiger. The tiger was myself. My hand brought the gun back down toward the girl as Schutten swore. Desperately, I forced it to one side as it fired again.

His teeth caught my tongue in a vengeful grip and bit off an edge of flesh. As I tried to force my jaw open, I saw the gun swing around again toward Ethel.

I brought my left hand chopping down against my right wrist. The maneuver took Schutten unexpectedly. The gun flew from his grip, skittered across the floor toward the sofa. He raced after it. But I forced my right foot over in half-stride and it caught behind my left ankle. I sprawled on the floor; skidded past the gun, and contin-

ued rolling, hoping Schutten wouldn't recognize the gyrations as being intentional. We hit the wall.

Schutten tried to crawl back to the weapon.

But I brought my elbows in tight against my side and clenched my fists together, holding them in a desperate grip so he could make use of neither hand.

Ethel stirred, rose feebly.

"Get out of here!" I shouted. "I can't hold him much—"

The crazed Schutten broke in with a string of vile expletives; frantically tried to wrench my fists apart.

Ethel, terrified now, raced from the apartment.

Schutten's throat and tongue moved, seeking vocal expression.

But I held my jaw tightly closed, knowing that if I relaxed there would be more torture. Horrified, I conjured up a picture of my lip being caught between the teeth.

We rolled over twice and, despite my attempt at holding my body in intense rigidity, he regained his feet.

I felt him raise his right foot to crush the bones of my left instep. In a desperate reflex, I bent the other knee, throwing us off balance. We fell.

Then suddenly he went limp. Our eyes were focused on the

open doorway.

Powers and another man came in and closed the door behind them.

"Figured he'd come here," the stranger told Powers. "The psychochart from his treatment showed the compulsion for revenge."

Exhausted from the struggle, I relaxed, surrendered control completely to Schutten. From the way it looked, he'd be forgetting about me for a while anyway.

Schutten rose slowly.

Powers held his hand stiffly alert in front of his open coat as he and the other man came forward.

"You shouldn't have hit me, Al," he said dolefully. Then he nodded to the man beside him. "Lanking can find out what we want to know about the money *without* striking up a deal with you, you know."

Schutten stiffened, drew his shoulders up squarely. "I didn't hit you," he said. "It was Novasmith. I wasn't in complete control."

"Weren't you?" Powers asked skeptically.

"What the hell you think I was doing? Rolling around on the floor for exercise when you came in a minute ago?"

Powers frowned.

"Let me handle this, sonny." He didn't speak the words, but I was

aware of them just the same. "*We're in a jam, but I think I can get us out of it.*"

It didn't take long to surmise how he'd gotten the message across. It was subvocalization. He had gone through the motions of talking while he passed his hands slowly over his face to conceal the movements of his lips which, together with his tongue, had formed the words. It hadn't even been a whisper.

Powers threw a confused stare at Lanking.

"It's possible," said Lanking. "He could have been taken off guard by Novasmith."

"*Now that we have them convinced,*" Schutten conveyed to me, "*we'll go on the offensive.*"

"Anyway," he turned challengingly toward Powers, "I didn't think it was such a bad idea to get away from you."

Powers drew back, starting.

"You think I'd trust you and that—that brain washer there—" Schutten continued, pointing to Lanking, "—with curing me?"

"Why not?" Powers demanded.

"Because I know he doesn't know anything about the process."

"You don't think he's connected with the Clinic?"

"He's connected with the Clinic, all right. That much I remember. He was an orderly when I was

treated—that's how he knew I didn't really sit in the big chair. But he was *only* an orderly."

AS he spoke, Schutten had been sidling over toward the sofa. Seeing the handle of the revolver protruding from beneath it, I could understand why. Should I try to stop him? Or, perhaps warn Powers and Lanking? Or, would my interest be better served with the gun in Schutten's hand?

"Lanking got a promotion," said Powers. "He's an assistant now." He turned to the thin man. "Aren't you?"

Lanking nodded. "Sure. I know all about the process."

I imagined Schutten could tell they were lying. I could.

We reached the sofa and dropped wearily onto it. Then my feet crossed in a sly motion that concealed the revolver handle behind them.

Even now I could put a kink in his plans if I wanted to. I had only to kick a foot back suddenly and the weapon would go skittering under the sofa out of reach. But I hesitated. Perhaps it was because my fear of the other two was as strong as his contempt for them.

"This talk isn't getting us anywhere," Powers protested. "Where'd you hide the money, Al?"

Schutten laughed. At that moment, I didn't particularly feel amused. So his vocal expression came only as a grotesque sound. Powers and Lanking regarded each other suspiciously.

"If Lanking was qualified to cure me," Schutten said, "he would have been trusted enough at the Clinic to know there's no hidden money."

Powers swore, looked questioningly at Lanking.

"He got it, didn't he?" Lanking asked. "I don't remember reading where it was ever recovered."

"Lanking would have known," Schutten went on, "that Bradley got that information out of my mind first. The money was returned."

I could almost feel Schutten's amusement as he studied, first, Powers' disappointed expression, then, the sickly stare of confusion and apology that was on Lanking's face as he turned toward the other.

"Of course, they didn't tell the papers about it," Schutten said. "They would have had to explain how they learned where the money was hidden. And they would have had to admit that the governor pulled me out of the chair for an experiment."

Powers started threateningly toward the sofa.

I tried to stop him—not Powers,

but Schutten. I was aware of my body snapping forward; my hand darting down between my feet and coming up with the gun. But before I could react to the unexpected motion, the gun grunted through its silencer twice—a third time.

Powers was dead. I could tell it at first glance, even as he fell. One of the slugs had left its scorched mark in his shirt-front—on his breast a little to the left of dead center.

I didn't see where the slug hit Lanking. He was on the floor groaning, his eyes closed. I watched the two men—the dead one and the probably-dying one—as Schutten stood in the center of the room laughing. And I remained deathly still, cringing, fearing that at any moment he might remember me.

THERE was no doubt now that the man was a homicidal maniac. If he had killed out of necessity at the time of the robbery, he needed no necessity to force him to kill now. To him, murder was a simple pleasure . . . murder and torture, even if it meant self torture at the same time.

Where before there had been only the fear of the unknown, now there was a concrete fear. And, contrary to accepted opinion, concrete apprehension is more horrible than the other kind. When

faced with an unknown danger, a man might at least imagine there was hope.

I couldn't.

If they captured Schutten now—after this murder and near murder and after the attempted slaying of his wife—no authority would consent to another experimental execution. And they couldn't electrocute him without electrocuting me.

If he resisted capture, they wouldn't hesitate to shoot him down.

I considered pleading with him as he walked calmly out the room and into the street. But how do you go about pleading with a madman?

"Still there, Novasmith?" he asked as he walked toward the cab stand on the corner.

I didn't answer. If only I could get him to Bradley's Clinic! I grasped at the remote possibilities. At the Clinic, they might overpower him without killing him. And they might effect another treatment without harming me.

But, if I got him to the Clinic, wouldn't I also be serving up the opportunity for another murder?

"Nice show, wasn't it?"

"Y-Yes," I agreed, almost afraid to use the same vocal cords which he had established as his through his demonstration of terror.

"But I missed Ethel," he said

sorrowfully. "That was a shame. Wasn't it?"

I didn't answer. I knew now just how hopelessly insane he was.

He balled his fist and sent it crashing into my stomach, almost knocking the breath out of me.

"I said that was a shame!" he shouted.

"Yes," I agreed hastily. "It was a shame."

"We might get another chance though. But we wouldn't have if we had stayed in the apartment. She probably went to call the cops again."

"I suppose she did," I said, hoping he wouldn't notice the tremolos that claimed the voice whenever it was my turn to use it.

If only I could steer him toward the Clinic! If I could only get him there before he went berserk again!

The cab driver opened the door for us and we entered.

"Where to, sir?" he asked as he flicked on the power receiver and started the engine.

"Take us to Bradley's Clinic," Schutten said.

I reacted to the phrase as though someone had boomed a bass drum next to my ear.

The driver's had jerked back over his shoulder and he raised an eyebrow at me.

"Yes, sir," he said facetiously, mockingly. "We certainly will."

Hope surged—and plunged. Schutten was taking me to the only place where I might have a chance. I was letting him go on to another murder.

"Novasmith," he whispered, "our fun ain't over yet. Stick with me and you'll split your sides."

I kept silent.

"How'd you like to kill a world-famous psychiatrist?" It was an offer made with eager magnanimity.

I closed my eyes in despair. He opened them again.

"And this time, Novasmith," he threatened, "I won't put up with any funny stuff. I'm warning you. I'm going to have things my way."

It wasn't that specific threat that left me trembling. It was the sudden, stark realization that even if he did succeed in his homicidal determination, he would probably end his reign of self-satisfying terror as most maniacs of his type do . . . by killing *himself* while basking in the satiety of his accomplishments—before anyone else could take his life and spoil the fullness of his victory.

At the entrance to the Clinic, I restrained an impulse to call out to the guard. It might only have meant an immediate killing. And there was the hopeful possibility that Bradley might not be

in after all.

We went down a long corridor in the right wing of the almost deserted building.

"Schutten," I said, groping for some means of delaying him. "We're thirsty. How about a few drinks? There's a bar—"

"Shut up!" he ordered gruffly, but in a low voice.

"Bradley's secretary will probably be in," I went on. "If you barge in you might have to kill her too."

"There's plenty slugs in this thing." He patted the gun in my pocket. "Anyway, he doesn't use a secretary."

A shaft of light fanned out into the hall from an open doorway almost at the end of the corridor. A small sign hanging above it, perpendicular to the wall, read: "M. V. Bradley, CrmPsy D."

But from the stillness in the room, it was evident no one was there. I started to sigh in relief. But then I remembered Schutten too would experience the sigh and it might lessen my later chances of humoring him convincingly.

Despite the silence, however, he continued down the hall.

But suddenly a sob was an explosive sound coming from the room. I would have shouted in surprise had not Schutten reacted faster and clamped our mouth

tightly shut.

"There, now, Mrs. Schutten," the voice of an elderly man said in the room. "Everything'll be all right."

"That's him!" Schutten whispered eagerly. "That's Bradley!"

"The police," Bradley went on, "will be at your apartment in a few minutes and you'll be able to go back home. He won't get a chance to harm you."

The hell he won't! I wanted to shout. But Schutten's mouth was a vise again. And I was becoming desperate. If I was going to do something, it would have to be quick. I would have to think of the ruse in the few seconds it would take to cover the remaining distance between us and the door.

I could struggle. But that would only attract their attention; expose them to more immediate danger, and infuriate him.

I could. . . what?—try to overcome his control and bash my head against the wall, rendering myself and him unconscious? But suppose I missed? Suppose he could prevent the blow from being hard enough?

The hopeless fact of the matter seemed to be that I *couldn't* do anything now that might not be more effective later if I could catch Schutten off guard. And there was always that remote possibility that something might intervene.

He drew up and stood silently in the hall against the wall, listening. And all the while I knew he was alert for some indication of opposition from me.

"But" Ethel said frantically, "he's going to kill me! He's going to kill you too!"

Smart girl. Somehow she had cast aside her idea of dying sacrificially. It was beginning to seem that her entire behavior in the apartment had been a ruse. She must have known he was criminally insane.

"He's not going to kill anybody, Ethel," Bradley said reassuringly. "The police will be here too."

There was silence for a moment.

"I suppose this means the end of psychoexecutions?" she said, concerned.

BRADLEY laughed. "Of course not. Your husband was the first. We've come a long way since then. With him, we only—shall we say?—stunned the established synapses of the killer's mental activity while we shunted aside his impersonal knowledge for use by the nova-personality. Now, the process is perfected. We actually *destroy* those personality synapses. We even spent two months exposing the last subject to scenes and things and persons from his past—with no associative reaction result-

ing."

"But," she went on, "when they find out that a killer got loose, won't that ruin the whole program? And they were just going to announce it too."

"It'll still be announced. One false start out of fifty successful psychoexecutions isn't cause for throwing out the whole program. The governor told me only yesterday that he had expected only seventy-five per cent success in the experiments. We've hit close to ninety-nine per cent. But I'll be interested in learning what brought John Novasmith back despite the compulsion to stay away from the state. Whatever it was, I imagine we'll find it was connected with the missing files on your husband and with Lanking's disappearance."

So that seemed to be the whole story—the entire explanation for my being. Well, I had learned everything I had wanted to know—almost everything. But knowledge isn't always encouraging—especially when it's in the form of confirmation that you're locked up in a cell with a murderous madman.

"If it's a success," Ethel observed thoughtfully, "then that means that the sight of a relative won't transform one of the—the nova-people back into a killer."

"Don't take hope, child. Yes. It

means that. But killers will still have to be torn away from all past associations. We must continue to give them false memories to make them believe they are normal people. They will still have to be fitted in, psychiatrically, into new surroundings with compulsions against their finding out about their false histories. And they won't be permitted to come in contact with people who knew them in their previous identity. We must continue to guard them against psychoses and to save ourselves unnecessary laboratory work."

I could hear her small heels beating the floor as she paced.

"Relax, Ethel," I heard Bradley urge. "If it'll make you feel any better, I'll call the guard at the door, in case your husband should decide to come here."

SCHUTTEN'S lunge took me by surprise. Before I could react, we were standing in the doorway. But he didn't draw the gun.

Ethel started to scream, but her mouth froze open without uttering a sound.

Bradley was a small, chubby man with a face that, even now, showed little emotion as he leaned with an elbow against an open liquor cabinet behind his desk.

"Hello, Schutten," he said casually. "Sit down. Have a drink."

I got it right away. He was the world's foremost psychiatrist. You wouldn't expect his control to be shattered before a rampaging killer, not when he might instead use the lore of his trade in effecting self preservation.

He was humoring Schutten, but professionally unobtrusively.

And I could feel the rage in Schutten's body as Bradley refused to cringe.

With exaggerated malevolence, he closed the door behind us and locked it with the key while Ethel, pale with fright, went over and stood close to the psychiatrist, as though she believed the small man might offer her protection.

Schutten and I crossed to the window, I alert for the moment he would reach for the gun.

"I'll stand here," he said, leaning against the sill. And I felt his face erupt into a smile. "There's no hurry now. I've got a few minutes to waste—until the police arrive. From here, I can see the entrance."

There was no doubt about it now. His only interest was in exacting his double vengeance, then killing himself. Otherwise, he would be eager to murder Bradley and Ethel with dispatch and escape.

"It hasn't been fun, doc," he said acidly. "Take a man and slip him a needle—the kind you slipped

me day after day for three months in this building. An injection that cuts your body away from your mind. Put that man in a dark dungeon where he can't hear or see or feel or taste or smell anything. Lock him up with his thoughts for three years. Let him try to scream day after day after day—without a throat, without lips, without lungs. That's the way it was with me."

Bradley shrugged. "You would have died in an electric chair. I don't think hell would have proven any more comfortable."

It was the psychiatrist's subtle way of nudging the madman into an argument; killing time. I hoped Schutten wouldn't recognize the ruse.

"But I told you I'd come back, didn't I!" he shouted triumphantly. "I told you I'd come back and kill you and her!"

For a moment, his eyes flicked on Ethel. Over the initial shock of being surprised by her killer-husband, she was stoic now. She stared at me with unwavering eyes. She was as calm as Bradley. She had recaptured the original self-possession she had displayed in the apartment.

She had the expression of a saint about to accept martyrdom. In all my life I had never known a girl like her. And I wondered how she

could have ever gotten mixed up with a character like Schutten. She was the kind of girl I might have died for . . . and probably would.

There was Bradley — fighting desperately; sweating it out inwardly while his expression remained that of a bored patron at an afternoon recital.

And there was Ethel—facing death with serene resignation, realizing frustratedly that any defense she might try would be useless.

And I? What was I doing? I was passively being pulled along, afraid to move because I was mentally handcuffed to a maniac with a gun. I was the weakest one in the room! I felt a cold fury begin to rise in me. After all, he *wasn't* any stronger than I!

I tensed for action.

"DON'T try anything, Novasmith," Schutten said warily. "Somebody'll get hurt before their time."

Hopelessly, I relaxed. He was right. If I was going to do anything it would have to be something thoroughly planned. Panic-stricken thrashing wouldn't work. It would have to be some action that would take him by surprise; disable him—and me; give them the opportunity to get help.

"Novasmith?" Bradley said.

I remained silent.

"Answer him," Schutten ordered.

"Yes?" I said to Bradley.

"I'm sorry about all this," the criminal psychologist apologized. "It wasn't supposed to work out this way. It must have been hell finding out."

"About Canton?"

"Yes. When I had to decide on your past, I just picked the name of a town—any town—Canton. It didn't make any difference that I didn't remember the town too well. You weren't ever supposed to return to find out that we had thrown together piecemeal memories, convenient half-truths, in manufacturing a plausible past that you wouldn't question."

Brakes squealed and Schutten snapped my head toward the window . . . just when I was looking at the bottles of whiskey visible through the open mahogany doors of the liquor cabinet.

Outside, two uniformed policemen and three plainclothesmen were hurriedly getting out of a powercar which was still rocking on its springs.

Schutten brought the gun from his pocket.

"Al," I said.

"Shut up!" he crossed the room, advancing on Bradley and the girl. He was going to exact the utmost pleasure from the act.

"Al, I need a drink."

I was shaking. That he could feel the physical reaction was evident in the string of oaths he muttered.

He raised the gun. But the entire arm shook.

We were standing by the liquor cabinet now. The psychiatrist and Ethel had retreated to the corner of the room.

The girl wanted to scream. I could tell it by the spasmodic way in which her throat was working. But she was wisely suppressing it.

"A quick shot, Al," I pleaded. "I've never killed anybody before."

I *had* to get him to take a drink.

Disgustedly, he reached for a bottle, pulled its stopper out with his teeth while he held on firmly to the gun, allowing for the possibility that I might be trying to distract him so I could knock it from his hand.

My head snapped back and a mouthful of hot whiskey gurgled in.

But, just as he closed his mouth to swallow, I parted my lips and inhaled savagely.

Aerated whiskey rushed down my windpipe, sloshed into my lungs.

I coughed. I gagged. I spat. Everything turned red, then black. Half drowned, I reeled dizzily. My chest was a roaring volcano and

my eyes were watering so that I couldn't see, even if I hadn't been violently coughing and wallowing in a mire of near unconsciousness.

But, through all the torturing sensations, I could feel the gun slip from my hand as I grabbed for my throat and I could hear Ethel's screams; the sound of the door crashing in before the battering-ram weight of husky shoulders.

Strong arms pinned mine to my side, held my legs.

Schutten's tongue and throat labored in unspoken curses as he tried to work his mouth open. But I held my teeth rigidly together, remembering how easily a tongue could be mangled in the mouth of an enraged madman.

Then I opened my eyes to see Bradley bending over me with the hypodermic syringe. A moment later the needle slipped into my arm.

BRADLEY snapped off the switch and the background sibilations of the speaker hissed to silence.

He looked over at the almost nude, still form of John Novasmith on the metal table as an assistant removed the telereceptor helmet from his head.

"That seems to be everything," the psychiatrist said, turning toward Ethel. "It was a fairly com-

plete account. I'm sure it covers every single impression he's retained of the incidents since he received the space-o-gram."

"And now you'll remove them?" she asked, staring solicitously at the still figure.

"We'll erase them—but only after we've obliterated Al Schutten; after we've swept away every thread of his personal-identity cerebrosynaptic constitution. Then we'll get a second recounting of the incident from Novasmith, check it against this one," he tapped the wire recorder on the desk of the small laboratory room, "and perform a partial erasure. We'll substitute the memory of a pleasant vacation on Earth. Within a couple of weeks he'll be back at his job with the mining company."

Ethel rose sullenly to leave.

But Bradley caught her arm.

"You still love him, don't you?"

She nodded. "But don't remind me of it," she said bitterly.

"You think you'd love him regardless of whether he was John Novasmith or Al Schutten?"

Again she nodded.

He reached into his pocket. "Here's a ticket on the Mars liner. It leaves tonight. You'll have a letter of recommendation to the mining company. You'll be working there when he returns."

Her face was vivid with disbe-

lief.

"I could make him fall in love with you," Bradley said, smiling. "But that wouldn't be fair. There will be a secondary compulsion, however—a feeling of interest when he meets you. You'll have to

take it from there."

Demurely, she smoothed out the hair where it lay against her shoulder and straightened the waist of her dress.

"I will," she said confidently.

THE END

Light mines were the constant dread of all Earthmen during the Vanite war. Now one tracked Brooks' ship, and the crew knew they had only —

Four Hours To Eternity

by

S. M. Jenesshaw

IT was his baby, Captain Robert Brooks thought slowly. There wasn't anybody he could turn to, there wasn't anybody who was going to tell him the answers. Rank had its privileges but rank also had its problems and this one was the great granddaddy of them all.

"I think," he said slowly, "that we have something like four hours to live. Maybe a few minutes less."

His throat felt dry with fear and he wondered if the others felt the same way. All the officers were new, and this was their first engagement. There was Pearsons from Engineering, his pencil moustache dripping sweat but his face looking perfectly calm. Then Mead, his pasty-faced Armaments officer, and finally Bennett, the philosophic communications officer, already looking resigned.

Pearsons broke the silence first.

"You sure it's a mine?"

"I couldn't mistake it, Ensign Mead said shakily, not taking his eyes off the viewplate. "Training films showed it exactly like this."

The captain caught himself looking at the viewplate again. The small, red dot of the *Tanner* crawled steadily across the black glassite while a few centimeters behind it was a tiny, white speck, inching along at the same speed and on the same identical course.

Death, he thought bleakly. Shattered hulls and exploded men and nothing left that would ever see a decent burial in the rich, black soil of Earth. Minor statistics for the casualty reports. . .

The relentless tick-tick-tick of the chronometer interrupted his thoughts once more and he could smell the sweat in the room and feel the fear gathering in the corners like the shadows did when



you switched off the glow-lights.

"What are we going to do?" Pearsons asked calmly, staring at the viewplate.

There was a short silence and then Bennett turned to the captain. "Any orders, Captain?"

Any orders. He had been waiting for that. And now, for the first time, he realized what responsibility meant. A ship, a crew of

fifty, and two hundred passengers. Whether they lived or whether they died — it was up to him.

"How long has it been following us, Turner?"

The enlisted man at the viewplate glanced up. "It just came on the screen. I reported it right away, sir."

"We can blast it out of space!" Bennett said suddenly. "We've got

homing rockets on board that could blow it to smithereens! We've. . ."

The captain smiled bleakly. "You do that, Mr. Bennett. And be sure to say your prayers at the same time you launch your rockets. Even though that mine is a hundred miles away, when it goes off, it's the end for us."

Bennett turned ashy white. "But there isn't any weapon like that!" he whispered. "It's impossible!"

"Mr. Pearsons," the captain said grimly. "Tell him."

"It's a new weapon of the Vanites," Pearsons said quietly. "A conventional weapon would be harmless if it exploded a hundred miles away. The shrapnel would be too diffuse, so would the expanding gases, and there's no medium to transmit the shock waves. But the mines work on light pressure. One of them goes off and it will rupture the sides of the ship—and us along with it. I've seen stereo photos and it's not a pleasant way to die."

Bennett wasn't ready to give up. "It must come on us through some electronic set-up. We should be able to take electronic counter-measures, throw it off course."

The captain looked at him in disgust. "We're a passenger ship, Mr. Bennett. You know we haven't the transmitters or the power to do that."

Bennett's face stiffened. "Then there isn't anything we can do. We're as good as dead."

They were waiting for him to tell them that it wasn't true, the captain thought slowly. They were waiting for him to pull a solution out of the hat, to give them hope.

"You're too much of a pessimist, Mr. Bennett," he said with a confidence that he didn't feel. "We're not dead yet and there's a great deal we can do. You can start by calling all crew members who aren't on watch to the control room. Mr. Pearsons, you check the spacesuit locker for useable suits. Mr. Mead, you're in charge of internal security. That means no rumors. Any member of the crew caught spreading them will be court-martialed."

After they had left, he walked over to the viewplate and stared at the crawling dots. The responsibility, he thought, feeling the palms of his hands grow damp. The awful, crushing responsibility, the lives of two hundred and fifty human beings. . .

The steady ticking of the chronometer seemed to grow louder and he glanced sharply at the plastic face. They only had three and a half hours left to live.

Just a little longer and they would have been safe, he thought. A little longer and they would

have been at the rendezvous spot where they were to meet the task force. A few hours more and he would have been one of the few captains in the Terran fleet to take a passenger ship through a Vanite war zone.

But time was running out.

He brushed a tired hand across his forehead and wondered if somebody else wouldn't have made a better captain. Somebody like Pearsons, who always seemed so calm and unafraid. . .

THREE hours and fifteen minutes, Lieutenant George Pearsons thought coldly. One hundred and ninety-five minutes and the life of George William Pearsons would be snuffed out like a candle. A government telegram to his wife and maybe a couple of lines in one of the New Albuquerque papers. And all because . . .

"Mr. Pearsons," the captain was saying. "The suits?"

"There's a full compliment of a dozen spacesuits," he said, trying to keep his voice from shaking in front of the crew members. "They were all tested recently — shoulder rockets and air equipment work perfectly."

The captain grunted and Pearsons swore inwardly, cursing the quiver in his voice which he suspected the captain had caught. But

that was something that had been with him all his life, he thought helplessly. The blue funk that always seemed to fog his mind in time of danger. Once, when he had been an enlisted man, in an ambush near Fomalhaut. . .

He choked the thought back and forced himself to look at the lines of men that filled the control room. None of them looked frightened, he thought sourly, but then they didn't know what the situation was.

"I'll make it short and not too sweet," the captain said quietly. "You know the chances you took when you were assigned to this ship. You knew she was going through a war zone. Well, the worst thing that could happen, has. We've picked up a Vanite light mine. To be blunt, we have something less than three hours and fifteen minutes to live."

Pearsons watched the blood drain from their faces. They were scared now, he thought, feeling a mild surge of triumph. Even Yates, the scowling, shift-eyed enlisted technician who had been hauled out of the brig so he could be there, was pale.

"We have a chance," the captain continued gravely. "There's a bare chance that a man might go out there and disable that mine. For that, we need a volunteer."

There was a dead silence in the room and Pearsons could feel his stomach curl up into a tight, hard ball. Go out into the black, dreadful silences of space for a rendezvous with a light mine. Go a hundred miles out into the stillness so you lost all contact with the ship, all contact with life itself, and you were absolutely alone in the immensity of space.

There wasn't a spaceman alive who didn't have nightmares about being stranded in the lonely dark, of floating forever in the vast sea of nothingness. You could see it every time a rocket landed at a port. Spacemen didn't head for the quiet, lonely spots. They had to have crowds and noise and drunken laughter to chase away the nightmares of loneliness.

And now the captain was asking somebody to step into one of the nightmares, to make it come true.

Bennett raised his hand and so did one of the crew members — a skinny kid who worked as a corpsman in the infirmary.

"It'll be a tough job," the captain continued. "It'll take a man who knows machinery and electronics, a man who isn't afraid of space. A man who's a hard-headed realist."

Now that was odd, Pearsons thought. The captain wasn't taking any notice of Bennett and the

corpsman.

"There'll be a substantial reward. All advances that a man may have drawn against his pay record will be canceled. So will all past court martials and present brigtime."

Bennett and the corpsman looked puzzled and slowly lowered their hands. The captain said softly: "We only have three hours left. Pretty soon it will be impossible to send anyone out."

He paced back and forth in front of the men, then suddenly slowed when he came to Pearsons' engineering division. Pearsons frowned. Hadley Stevens, and Marshall — all new men and not even rated. And then Yates, older and cynical, the rated man in charge who was always so difficult to handle. Insolent and unmilitary. . .

Pearsons' mind suddenly clicked into high. Raymond Yates. A record that had always fallen a millimeter short of earning a dishonorable discharge. A gambler, a drunkard, a man who constantly drew on his pay and owed everybody on board. Negligent in his duties, sloppy in his appearance, and currently in the brig for making a pass at a woman passenger. And also the best technician in the crew.

Suddenly there was a noise and a pushing in the rear ranks and the captain was stepping forward

smiling, and grasping Yates' hand.

"That's the spirit, Yates! You'll have all the help we can give you!"

After the rest of the crew had left, a group of shipfitters laid out the spacesuit and Yates struggled into it. There was only the captain, Yates, Pearsons, and the man on viewplate watch in the cabin.

Yates hesitated before putting on the helmet. Sweat was digging furrows down his unshaven face and he wiped a damp hand on his coarse, black hair. His eyes were angry slits and he almost spat when he talked to the captain.

"You think you're smart rail-roading me, don't you, Cap'n?"

"You volunteered, the captain pointed out quietly.

"I volunteered my foot! You, you and you — that's how you did it." He moved a little closer to the small figure of the captain. "I ain't forgetting! And when I come back, I'll think of someway to make you pay!"

"You've got two hours and fifty minutes," the captain said, his face not changing expression. "Signal when you're done and we'll pick you up."

Yates glared, then put on the helmet and the gauntlets and lumbered towards the airlocks. He entered the hatch and the big valve closed slowly after him.

Pearsons glanced at the chronometer and thought shudderingly that the captain was wrong when he had said there were two hours and fifty minutes left. It was actually a little less than that.

The quiet whoosh of air made him turn back to the lock. It was really very clever of the captain to send Yates, he thought smugly. Why endanger valuable lives when there were men like Yates around? People like Yates were more like animals than human beings. They didn't think, they didn't actually feel things like other people did. . .

"CAN you hear us, Yates?"

"Sure, I can hear you. Radio reception's okay."

"Fire your directional rockets a little to the left, towards Deneb. Otherwise you'll overshoot it."

"And that'd be just too damned bad, wouldn't it?"

There was a click in his helmet and the muffled tones of the captain.

"Follow orders, Yates!"

Yates uttered a wordless snarl, then adjusted the rockets. He had two hours and ten minutes left. One hundred and thirty minutes to disable a mine he had never seen before and to save the ship and the two hundred and fifty people on her. And just incidentally, his own life in the bargain.

Outside of the stars themselves, the flare from his shoulder rockets stretching behind him was all that he could see. The *Tanner* was so far away it didn't even hide any of the stars; its comfortable bulk was a pinpoint of black lost in the darkened wastes.

He was alone, he thought. Absolutely alone in the blackness that stretched for light-years all around him.

And then the nightmare came back. The one where he was standing in the middle of a corn flower field that stretched clear to the blue horizon. Then the flowers faded and shriveled and disappeared altogether; he was standing on a field of pure black slate that reached for miles with nothing to break up the landscape. Then the key darkened and the slate grew misty and tenuous and he felt himself falling into space. Alone, absolutely alone . . .

His scream almost shattered his own eardrums. Then his helmet radio buzzed and he heard the rasping, metallic voice of the captain.

"I thought you were a hard-headed man, Yates?"

"I'm as hard as anybody," he chattered back.

"You better be. You're almost there."

He searched the vacant stretches

ahead and then spotted it revolving slowly in the blackness a thousand yards away, occluding the stars behind it. He braked his rockets and spiraled slowly down to it.

It was a black, metallic sphere ten yards in diameter. He circled warily around it. At first it seemed perfectly featureless with no indentations or projections aside from the rocket ports.

"Ninety minutes, Yates."

He was sweating so badly he was afraid he was going to fog the face plate of his helmet.

He circled it again and then made out the thin, sharp lines that marked a square port on the side. He cut off the rockets and his magnetic shoes drew him slowly down to the sphere's surface. A neatly outlined, square port with even a recessed entrance wheel.

He touched the wheel and then abruptly backed away, shaking violently. It was . . . too easy. A mine like this would be tamper proof, at least as tamper proof as the builders could make it. The port and the wheel were probably a . . . booby trap.

But there had to be some way to get in! The Vanites would have had to enter to set up the detonator and the timer! That way would still be there. . .

It took him a minute to see it and then only because a pea-sized

meteorite must have grazed the side of the mine and flaked away the paint, showing an incision almost too fine to be seen by the naked eye.

"An hour and twenty minutes, Yates. Eighty to go."

Goodbye blue skies and mountains and fish streams. Goodbye green grass and roses and the feel of the earth at planting time.

He scraped gently at the paint with a magnetic scraper and then he had it outlined. A square port, about the same size as the one on the other side, with little rectangular strips that might be handles set flush in the metal. He stepped on one with a magnetic boot and lifted up. The handle obligingly popped into view. He did the same with the other one, then bent down, straddling the port, and grasped the handles.

And then his stomach turned over and he was almost sick. This, too, could be a booby trap. They might have guessed that he would be suspicious about the other one, so this might have been the trap and the other one the real McCoy.

HE let go of the handles and straightend slowly up. The Vanties. Did they know a lot about human beings, how they thought? He tried to remember past battles and whether the Vanites took cap-

tives. They did, he thought slowly, and they had earned a reputation for being tricky.

He bent down and looked for the scratch he had seen first. It was a pretty even scratch, he thought. Machine made? Maybe. And then he looked closer and saw the tiny fleck of rust against the shine of the bare metal. Metal didn't rust in space . . . but if the scratch had been cleverly planted in the atmosphere of a planet?

He went back and calmly turned the wheel on the other port.

"You've got seventy minutes, Yates."

He glanced inside the port, at the tangle of copper wiring amid the resistors and the huge condensers. A hundred thick wires waiting to be cut, he thought. But which one?

There was a flashlight at his belt and he fumbled for it and flicked it around the inside of the port. Copper wires, some thick and some thin, snaking around the different electronic elements. And one, thicker than the rest, carefully wrapped in insulation and resting on porcelain supports. The power cable, he thought, cut it and the mine would be dead!

And then the thought died as suddenly as it had been born. The mine had been triggered, it was in operation, and the power cable

would be hot. How could he cut it without grounding the power supply and causing a minor, electrical explosion that would set off the whole mine?

He hung in the opening, his mind a frightened blank. The minutes were steadily ticking away and he knew he couldn't delay much longer. . .

Then he spotted the thin, red wires that fanned out like a web along the inside surface of the sphere. Two dozen wires leading to . . . where? He let go of the port and blasted a few yards off into space. The mine was a sphere studded with steering rockets. He slowly counted them. Twenty-four. The wires led to the steering rockets. He wriggled back inside the port, took the snippers from his belt, and hurriedly severed the copper lines.

"I think I've got it," he said finally. "Change course and see if it follows."

There was a moment of silence in his earphones. The wires inside the port suddenly sparked but that was all; there was no sense of acceleration.

"Congratulations, Yates—you've done it!"

He grinned in the darkness. "It was nothing."

Then there was a new voice in his helmet. The Captain again.

"Yates—you've disabled the steering rockets and the mine is now a derelict, correct?"

He felt like swaggering inside his suit. "That's right, Cap'n. You can pick me up now."

"We can't abandon a derelict," the captain's voice went on calmly. "You know that. You're going to have to stay there, Yates. You're going to have to explode that mine."

"Cap'n," he said patiently, like he was explaining it to a child, "if I blew it up now, I'd be blowing myself up with it."

"I'm sorry, Yates, but it's got to be done."

He froze there in the darkness, feeling a weakness in his kidneys and then a sudden warmth. "I'm not about to commit suicide, Cap'n," he choked. "For you or anybody else. Either pick me up or I'll come back to the ship—there's enough left in my shoulder rockets so I can make it."

"If you come back, Yates, you'll be shot, I'm commanding you to blow that mine up!"

The nightmare was back again. He abruptly knew he was going to die out there.

"I won't do it!"

"That's an order, Yates."

Yates cursed, the fury boiling up within him. "You knew somebody was going to have to die out here, didn't you? And you thought it

might just as well be me, didn't you? I don't count! I'm not worth anything to anybody, am I?"

The captain's voice was emotionless. "*Follow out your orders, Yates!*"

"You son-of-a-bitch!" Yates screamed. "You railroaded me!"

There was no answer. He looked out at the stars and the blackness and then felt something wet on his cheeks and knew that he was crying. My Holy Mother of Mary, goodbye . . .

Nobody gave a damn back on the ship he thought sickly, clinging weakly to the port. Guys like Bennett who had a million dollars and looked like movie stars and were born to wear the purple, they didn't care. They never cared if somebody like him lived or died. . .

LIEUTENANT Lewis Bennett stood at the quartz port and stared steadily out at the stars. Any minute now, he thought, there would be the flash of light that would mark the end of the mine and the death of one Technician Raymond Yates. Just like that. One quick, blinding flash and Yates would be nothing but drifting atoms and a fading memory for those on board the *Tanner*. The ship had gotten safely out of range, but Yates was caught.

He heard somebody come up be-

side him but he didn't turn around. He knew who it was.

"I wouldn't advise looking out the port," the captain said quietly. "It'll be pretty bright." Bennett didn't answer and the captain said: "Thinking about Yates, Mr. Bennett?"

"Yes."

"It'll be over in a fraction of a second. He won't feel a thing."

Men were as expendable as rocket fuel to the captain, Bennett thought to himself. He said: "How does it feel to kill a man, Captain?"

"You're forgetting yourself, aren't you, Lieutenant?"

"No," Bennett said, full of loathing. "I'm just remembering myself. You sent a man out to his death and I didn't say a word against it."

"It had to be done," the captain said quietly.

"Yates said you railroaded him," Bennett said tightly. "I agree. You sent him out there when you *knew* he couldn't come back! You lied when you told him we'd pick him up!"

"Does everybody think that?"

Bennett turned back to the port. "Ask them."

The captain looked at Mead and Pearson. "Do you men think that?"

They stared stonily back at him and nodded.

"I had to do it," the captain said mildly. "I had to ask for volunteers

to send out."

"You didn't ask for volunteers," Bennett said dryly. "You played God and chose Yates, the one man whose life you figured was of no use to anybody. And who the hell were you to judge?"

"I chose Yates because he was the man for the job, Mr. Bennett." Nobody answered him. "I was following the book," he continued, his voice edgy. "The book says you do not leave derelict mines floating in space. There was only one way for us to destroy it, and that was for Yates to set it off. I'm sorry but that's the way it had to be."

Bennett sneered. "The book! Was it really worth a human life?"

"Yes," the captain said, slowly walking towards the hatch. "It really was."

They turned to watch him as he left and it was then that the mine went off and the flaming light poured through the ports, pulsing in waves that they could almost feel.

IT was half an hour later that Viewplate Operator Charles Turner picked the object up on the plate and told Lieutenant Pearsons about it. For a moment, Mead and Bennett thought it was another mine. But the object kept gaining on them and it didn't have the same dimensions or mass that a mine would have.

Ten minutes later they could see the tiny flare of jets a few miles off. A few minutes after that there was a scrambling sound at the hatch and then the gentle sigh of air filling the chamber. They watched in stunned fascination as the inner airlock wheel slowly turned. Then the hatch rolled smoothly back and Raymond Yates clumped into the room.

"Surprised, huh?"

Nobody said a word and he went ahead unbuckling parts of the suit. "It really wasn't hard," he said expansively. "I snooped around a little bit more and found the timer and just set it back one more hour—gave me enough time to get out of there. Should have thought of that right off, instead of bellowing my lungs out over the radio." He dropped one magnetic shoe to the deck and looked up at them. "Anybody got some coffee? My kidneys sprung a leak out there and I'm dry as a bone."

Bennett was the first one to step forward. "We think you got a dirty deal, Yates. If you want to sign a complaint against the Captain, we'll back you all the way."

He stared at them in amazement. "Complaint? Me? Against the Old Man?"

"He railroaded you," Pearsons said eagerly. "We all know it."

Yates stared at them. "Sure, 'he

said finally, "the Old Man railroaded me. He had to. I was the only man who could do the job and he and I both knew it. We weren't kidding each other one bit." He hesitated a minute, then glanced at Pearsons. "I take it back. You could've done it. You're the engineering officer, you know a lot about machinery. But you didn't volunteer and now the Old Man and the crew know you got a yellow streak down your back the width of the Milky Way."

"I volunteered," Bennett said stiffly.

"Glory hound," Yates sneered, taking off the other boot. "What would you have done once you got out there? You know enough about electronics to take it apart?"

Bennett started to redden. "He didn't have to order you to commit suicide, Yates. That wasn't necessary . . ."

Yates looked at him as if he had crawled out from under a rock. "You forgot all about the task force we have a rendezvous with, didn't you?" he asked softly. "Its course goes right past that mine — and now think what a derelict mine, due to go off in an hour, would've done to that!"

Pearsons stood frozen by the bulkhead, his face a marble white. Mead and Pearsons stood by the port, their faces a flushed red.

Yates looked at them for a minute, a thoughtful expression on his face.

"There's all kinds of guts," he said suddenly. "There's the kind of guts it takes to go out and do something. That's one kind. And then there's the kind of guts it takes to send a man out on a job when you know he might not come back. That's another kind. And that's a real tough kind to find. Men who have that kind don't come along every day."

There were footsteps just outside the hatch and the captain came in.

"Aren't you out of that suit yet?" he asked dryly. "You're not in the brig anymore and you've got the watch."

"I was . . . just gettin' ready, sir," Yates stammered.

The captain looked at him with a stern face. "You're a no-good, Yates. You give me more trouble than all the rest of the crew put together. And I suppose it's going to be worse now that you're a hero." Suddenly he smiled. "That was a damned fine job you did out there."

"I did my best, Cap'n," Yates said, managing an embarrassed smile.

The captain put his hand on Yates' shoulder and squeezed gently, "That's why I sent you," he said quietly.

THE END

Mike's father had been one of the pioneers who blasted into the void — never to return. Now Mike wanted to carry on, so he took a trip to —

DREAM STREET

by

Frank M. Robinson

MICHAEL Donahue lay on the cinder embankment just outside the Proviso train yards, pressing himself into the shadows cast by the small clump of discouraged looking, oil-stained weeds that grew on top, along the tracks. He sprawled spread-eagled against the slope of cinders, not moving and only breathing enough to catch the mingled odors on the chill night air—the oily, dirty smell of the cinders and the faint, stomach-wrenching scent of slow-frying ham and eggs from the shanty a scant hundred yards away.

They must really be talking about it back at the Home, he thought. Sandy and Mick and Butz and the others were probably undressing for bed now and wondering where he was, wondering if he'd ever make it as far as Roswell and the Roswell Rocket Port

He moved slightly in the shadows, turning his head to look up at the blazing stars. There was the moon, splotchy with the shadowed areas that were Mare Tranquillitatis and Mare Imbrium. And then there was the tiny red dot of Mars and the fire that was Venus . . .

He changed his position a little, trying to ease his cramped muscles. A stone, loosened by his elbow, went clattering down the embankment. He tensed, but the noise was masked by the usual night sounds of small creatures in the brush along the tracks and by the clangor of the switch engines shuttling cars through the yards a block away.

A phone rang in the shanty. A moment later, men came out with lanterns and started through the yards, searching the low-slung, talgo freight cars.

They were probably looking for



him, he thought sickly, automatically flattening himself closer to the cinders. Mr. Gilman of the Home was plenty smart — maybe he had figured that a runaway wouldn't try to leave Chicago by bus or car, that it was too easy to get picked up that way. Maybe he had figured right off that a run-

away would try the freight yards.

One of the yard workers was coming closer, swinging his lantern so it cut through the night in big arcs, lighting up the tracks and the cinder slope. Mike bit his lips and prayed and the man stopped. Far down the track another light was fingering its way over the ties. The

Diesel grew bigger and rumbled slowly by, light weight freight cars swaying behind it.

It was heading west, Mike observed, his heart suddenly beating faster, and it had a string of empties at the end. He leaped to his feet and started running beside it, not caring whether the man with the lantern saw him or not. The train was picking up speed now, the whistle an eery blast in the night. The empties rattled by, doors half-way open. He cut in towards one. His fingers touched the frame and a sudden burst of speed and a lunge and he was half in and half out, his thin cotton pants whipping about his legs in the chill wind. He hung there a moment, then snatched a chestful of air and muscled himself inside.

He hunkered down by the open door, catching his breath and watching the suburbs roll by. Then they were out of the metropolitan area and peaceful farmlands and darkened woods stretched by the track, quiet and ghostly in the bright moonlight.

“KINA young to be on the lam, aren’t you, kid?”

There was the sound of a match being struck in the darkness and the yellow light flickered and flared in the empty freight car. The man who held the match was big, with a bigness that was more mus-

cle than fat. Whiskers sprouted in the creases of his face and under a once-mashed nose while watery blue eyes hid under a tangled undergrowth of brows.

“I—I’m old enough,” Mike said defensively.

The ham-like hand that held the match raised it a little so the feeble light fell across Mike’s face and chest.

“Just makin’ conversation, son. You’re big for your age but I could guess it at a young fourteen and not be more’n a month off.” There was a pause while the big man looked him over. “Somebody’s probably offerin’ good money for the whereabouts of a skinny, blonde-haired kid like you. What’s your name, Slim?”

Mike hesitated. “Bill.”

The big man’s eyes narrowed. “That ain’t for real, is it? Well, it don’t matter anyways. Goin’ west?”

Mike felt a little uneasy. “Roswell.”

The match went out. The big man didn’t bother lighting another one.

“Star-struck, huh?”

Reluctantly. “I guess so.” He didn’t want to talk about it. Not even Mr. Gilman, who was a right guy every other way, knew how it felt to stare at the stars at night and feel hungry inside, a hunger that didn’t go away no matter how many of the Home’s pork chops

and baked potatoes you ate.

The big man spat on the floor. "You oughta read the statistics, Slim. You're good for a couple of years and then the piles blow up and there ain't enough of you or the ship to bury in a six inch coffin. You get your name on a hunk of brass and that's it. And believe me, I oughta know."

"You been up, Mister?"

The big man made a noise. "Yeah, I been up. I was on a freight run to Titan for a couple of years."

Titan! The freight car was suddenly the control cabin on an M class rocket, the open door the port looking out on the stars. His voice seemed to come from far away.

"What was it like?"

The big man snorted. "I'll tell you what it was like! There was nuthin' to do. You sit on your fancy and stare out the ports and play cards. And then you land at Ley Village and unload your supplies and get drunk and that's all you do because there's no women there and then you come back. And if you don't have ulcers and weak kidneys and radiation burns by this time, you're one in a million."

The freight car was just a freight car again.

"You're looking at it the wrong way, Mister," Mike protested.

"I suppose you been up?"

"My Dad took me to Crater City

once." He'd never forget it, he thought slowly. The glassite domes over the small town and the mine diggings and the dazzling sunlight glinting off the harsh crater walls of Archimedes and Aristillus and the plains of pumice dust stretching beyond . . . He felt in his pocket for the small good-luck charm made out of a hunk of genuine crater rock that his father had once given him. It was round and almost perfectly smooth now from the number of times he had fingered it.

The big man changed the subject. "It takes money to get to Roswell. Even riding the rods all the way."

"I got enough."

The big man's voice turned thoughtful. "I'm sorry to hear you say that, Slim. I kinda need money myself."

He moved quickly in the dark and Mike suddenly felt something sharp and pointed pressing against his throat.

"Just don't move, Slim, and everything will be okay." Mike sat stock still, the inside of his mouth drying up while the palms of his hands turned wet. A practiced hand slipped into his right hand pocket and drew out his wallet. The pressure on his throat relaxed. There was a faint rustle of paper and he knew the big man was feeling for the money.

They had been going up a slight grade and the car door had slid open, showing the black sky and the blazing stars beyond. The big man was to Mike's right but still in front of the door. And he was too busy taking the money out of the wallet to notice anything else. Mike suddenly kicked out with his feet and the big man *oofed* and folded up, a fleeting expression of surprise on his beefy face as he sat down on the air outside the door.

Mike was shaking and sick to his stomach. Talgo trains made a hundred or more on slight grades. The big man wasn't going to bother him or anybody else —again.

His heart gradually slowed and he realized how lucky he had been. He was safe and still headed for Roswell, even if he no longer had the fifty bucks he had saved from his Home allowance. It was going to be hard to get along without the money. But that wasn't the important thing.

The important thing was that he was on his first step to Venusport.

Or Mars Town.

Or even Crater City.

SHE was big and blonde and bosomy with a too-tight skirt slit up the side and a mouth that was a slash of scarlet. She slouched under the street lamp, watching green-overalled spacemen

wander up the street, pausing as coins clinked against closed windows. The sign on the corner said Dream Street—a narrow street with too much neon and too little light, where rotting houses fronted directly on the sidewalks.

Mike watched her for a moment from the shadows across the street, then walked over.

"Could you tell me where Goddard Boulevard is, lady?"

He was still in shadow when he asked it and she automatically arched her back against the lamp-post and let her face slip into a professional smile.

"You're not in a hurry to get there, are ya, hon?"

He stepped closer and her smile faded. A thin, blonde-haired kid—tall for his age—in white cotton ducks and a short sleeved shirt and the narrow, intent face that was as much of a trademark as the two bearded ginks on the coughdrop boxes.

The syrup vanished from her voice and left it harsh and gravelly.

"Whaddya wanna find Goddard Boulevard for? See the port?"

He managed an uneasy smile. "I'd like to."

"It's pretty hard to stow away, kid. And you'd never make it in that get-up anyways."

"I—wasn't planning to stow-away," he lied, reddening.

"It's written all over your face,

kid—and you're going at it all wrong. You think all you wanna do is slip down to the port and watch but once you get there you'll try something foolish and you'll be caught and sent back to your folks."

"They'll never catch me," he said stubbornly.

"I used to know a kid like you," she mused. "A long time ago. He tried all the dodges. And then one day he made it."

For a brief moment her face softened and lost its harsh lines.

"What happened then?" Mike asked curiously.

"He never came back." She paused. "If I were you, I'd get a job down there so you got a reason for being there. Just hang around and the cops'll pick you up. You kids are an old story to them."

He started to ask her a question but she wasn't listening. A man was standing a few feet away, having trouble lighting his cigarette. She put on her smile and raised her voice a little.

"Shag it, kid. Come back when you're older."

He walked down the street past the penny arcades and the shooting galleries and the taverns that smelled of stale beer. The street was thick with green overalled men wearing the insignia of tube men or pile technicians or the crossed jets of pilots.

"... the whole planet's nothing but a goddamned swamp..."

"... place called Rose's, just down the block..."

"... for two months nothing but stars, nothing but the goddamned stars..."

"... dry, the atmosphere sucks moisture right out of you..."

"... so I says to the First Mate, you can take your GE jetman and jam..."

They were from faraway places, Mike thought dreamily. They had seen the native section of Mars Town, teeming with greenies and leathery skinned colonists, they had seen the rings of Saturn, and stood on the mountains of the moon. And maybe some day soon he would be right there with them
...

Dream Street abruptly turned into Oberth Avenue and a block more and he was standing under the chestnut trees that bordered the expressway of Goddard Boulevard. It was crowded with eager tourists and misty-eyed colonists-to-be, taking one last look at Earth.

Mike fought his way to the traffic filled street and looked down it. It was right there at the end of the boulevard, a few miles away. A bubble of light made up of search beams and the thin red flares that marked take-offs. The biggest rocket port in the world, fifty square miles of desert sand covered

with concrete landing aprons and surrounded with grassy parks so you could bring your lunch and watch the passenger liners take off for Venus or Mars and the freighters head out for the research posts on Saturn's moons.

He glanced down at his shirt and pants, rumpled with having slept in them and spotted with grease from the freight car, and realized the lady he had talked to earlier that evening was probably right. He couldn't get within a mile of the port like he was. He'd have to go at it kind of slow, and in the meantime he'd have to find a job and a place to sleep.

And something to eat.

MIKE stood in front of the window of Larry Doby's — a restaurant on Dream Street—and watched the middle-aged owner working at the griddle right in back of the glass.

Larry Doby had thick, corded arms, the beginnings of a small paunch, and a friendly face with an expression of absorbed attention. He ran a greased rag over the griddle and then poured out some batter in three small circles. They sat there a minute, little bubbles formed on top, broke and dried, and then he flipped them high in the air. They came down with the crispy brown side on top. He scooped them up when they were done,

set them on a plate with a pat of butter melting down the sides of the stack, then shoved the plate on the moving belt just behind the counter.

Mike swallowed automatically and realized there was a dull pain in the pit of his stomach. He hadn't had much to eat since leaving the Home and now he was so hungry he was almost sick. His hands explored his pockets hopefully for stray coins. There were none. He felt for his good luck piece, squeezed it affectionately, and went on in.

He took a seat at the end of the counter and pretended that he was reading the menu dial selector. You punched out your selection, a duplicate of it appeared on the board above the short-order cook working in the window, and he fixed it up and set it on the belt. You took it off when it got to your place. And you didn't like the looks of it, you just didn't claim it—the belt took it back to the cook.

Mike watched the belt nervously, hoping that nobody was watching. The pickings on the belt were slim—apparently Larry's had only satisfied customers. Finally a sweet roll came down that nobody had claimed. Mike palmed it under a paper napkin and started to walk out.

At the door, Larry set three pan-

cakes on a plate with one hand and grabbed Mike by the shirt collar with the other. "Ruby!" A thin, pale faced woman came out of the back room. "Take over, will you?"

He walked Mike over to a table at the side. "You don't eat unless you pay, sport. One roll is an eighth of a credit. How about it?"

Mike let the roll fall from his hand to the table top. "I don't have any money," he said sullenly.

Larry gave him a long, hard look that took in his rumpled shirt and dirt smeared pants. "Sit down—and don't try to beat it."

Mike sagged into one of the chairs. This was it, he thought, almost too tired to care. By tomorrow he'd be on his way back to the Home and the gang would call him a stupe—and they'd be right. The closest he'd ever get to Mars would be looking at it through his home made telescope.

A stack of cakes was shoved under his nose and he looked up to find the griddle man offering him a fork.

"Go ahead, eat 'em sport! You're hungry, ain'tcha?" He sat down in the other chair and watched Mike eat. "Where's your folks?"

Mike swallowed and wiped the syrup off his mouth with the back of his hand. "Don't have any — they're dead."

Larry leaned back in his chair and worked at his teeth with a

toothpick, "I'll buy that, though you don't look like the type to be on your own."

"I get by."

Larry's face was blank. "Yeah, I bet you do." He studied Mike carefully. "I got a proposition, sport. I need help, somebody to wait table. If I let the wife do it, too many guys make passes at her and there's trouble. You want a job, you can have it."

Mike made a production out of sopping up the syrup on his plate with a hunk of bread. It was nice of him, he thought slowly. But he'd been taking charity ever since his old man had died and he was sick of it.

"Thanks, but . . ."

Larry was belligerent. "But what? You want to hold me up for more dough? I don't pay much but I pay regular and on top of that, I'll let you sleep in back, okay?"

It didn't sound like charity, Mike admitted to himself, it looked like if he didn't take it, the griddle man would have to find somebody else. Something caught in his throat. "Gee, thanks a lot!" he blurted.

Larry got up to go, then sat down again, looking thoughtful. "Just one thing, sport. I've had kids work here before and they usually ended up trying to snag a berth on one of the rockets out at the port. The cops catch 'em and

ship 'em back to their home town and I usually never find out until a couple of days later. If you're gonna do something foolish, let me know beforehand, will you?" He paused, looking hard at Mike again. "And think it over before you take off. I came out here fifteen years ago with big ideas, too. I guess you begin to grow up when you realize you ain't gonna set the world on fire." He wiped the table with his apron and picked up the dishes. "You can get all the adventure you want, just listening to the guys in here talk. Keep your ears open—maybe you'll hear things that'll make you change your mind."

"Yeah, I might," Mike said absently.

But he knew that nothing he heard would make him change his mind.

HE liked working at Larry's restaurant. The pay was low but the meals were good and Ruby took care of his laundry so it averaged out pretty well. He could even set some money aside for the big plan.

But the best thing about working there was that he could listen to the talk that swirled along the counter and among the tables. Talk about places he had never seen, about places he had only read about . . .

There was an old cook on the Earth-Moon run, practically an

overnight hop, who had been working on the big ships ever since the early days when Crater City was nothing but a collection of pressurized steel bubbles huddling under the crater ledges of Archimedes. And there was Gim Wong, a tube man on the *Martian Prince*, a freighter on the regular run to the red planet. Gim was a walking history book, a man who knew more about the start of the colonization of the planets—Mike thought—than any other man living. . .

"Setting up colonies is easy now, but you should have seen it when they first started planting colonies on Mars. I remember bringing in the first load, and then the relief supplies a year later. Half the original colonists had frozen to death and the other half were fast on their way to starving. Seems their atomics man had died of the crawling sickness shortly after arrival and none of the rest knew how to run the power plant, couldn't even call for help. And then there was the time on Io when . . ."

But the best one of all was Captain Lieberman of the Cameron-Smith lines. He was a thin, wiry little man with a pencil thin waxed moustache and frigid blue eyes—real class. He and his second in command, a first mate named Schacht, stopped in at Larry's after every trip for a bowl of chili and crackers made the way that only

Larry could.

Mike brought them their orders, then found one reason or another to hang around their table, straining his ears for the cold recital of facts and figures between Lieberman and Schacht, facts and figures that were far more romantic to him than either man could have imagined.

One day Lieberman suddenly broke off in the middle of a discussion of the drawbacks of the concrete landing aprons on Mars and fixed Mike with a stony stare.

"You've got big ears, son."

Mike reddened and started to move away. "Sorry, sir,"

"Come here," Lieberman said curtly.

Mike walked over, nervously wiping his hands on the cotton towel wrapped around his waist.

"You like to listen to us talk about space,"—he waved his arms at the ceiling—"don't you?"

Mike flushed. "Yes, sir. I'd like to go out there some day."

"Why?"

There were a million reasons, Mike thought, but now that he had been pinned down, there were none that actually held water, none that would make much sense to Lieberman.

"I . . . I just want to, that's all."

Lieberman looked thoughtful. "That's the best answer I've heard yet. None of the others are worth

a damn. But it isn't everything you youngsters think it is. It's just hard work and boredom and if you've got any other ideas, forget them." His piercing eyes played coldly over Mike. "Maybe after you've seen a few ships hulled by meteors and men die trying to breathe space, some of the glamor would wear off."

Mike backed off towards the kitchen, embarrassed. "I—I got a pretty good idea of what it's like, sir."

Lieberman snorted. "All you youngsters think you do."

Mike was almost back to the kitchen when he stopped dead. The tall, thin man at the table by the kitchen door. He'd recognize him anywheres. The deep eyes and the thinning grey hair and the set of the shoulders . . . And the man had seen him.

He walked over. "Hello, Mr. Gilman."

The voice was friendly enough. "Have a seat, Mike. I want to talk to you." Mike folded quietly into the offered chair. "You want to take me back, don't you?"

"The Home isn't such a bad place, Mike. I don't see why you ran away."

Mike shrugged, his face blank. "You wouldn't understand, Mr. Gilman."

"I think I do." The voice turned persuasive. "What's wrong with

doing it our way, Mike? You'll be sent to school, you'll be taught the things you should know, rather than by learning by experience. You'll get what you want and you'll be better prepared for it. A few more years and you'll be apprenticed out to one of the regular lines."

Mike struggled to see it but it wasn't any good. His voice sounded tortured. "A few more years isn't today, Mr. Gilman!"

The tall man looked at him thoughtfully. "You can't wait, can you?" He got up. "Let's go, Mike."

"I'll have to get my things," Mike mumbled.

Mr. Gilman looked at his watch. "Give you five minutes—hurry it up."

Mike went out to the kitchen. It was empty. Larry was working in the front window, drawing in the evening customers. He wadded up his towel and threw it in the dirty clothes bin, then took down an empty pepper can from the spice shelf, opened it, and shook out his savings.

He was sorry he couldn't say goodbye to Larry. He was sorry, too, that he had to run out on Mr. Gilman.

But this was the best way.

THE gharled little man wearing the green eye shade said: "You got the money?"

Mike placed the bills on the battered table and pushed them down to him.

The man counted it carefully, then shoved it inside a tattered wallet. "How do you know I just won't take your money and tell you to get the hell out of here, son?"

"I heard you were a pretty square guy," Mike said simply.

The man laughed. "I should be ashamed of myself when a kid tells me that. Now exactly what is it you want?"

Mike moistened his dry lips with his tongue. "I want . . . an identity. You know, cards and papers for a background, to show I have parents and live in town here."

"What do you want it for?"

Mike hesitated. He felt that he had confided in too many people and that any of them could cross him up by telling. "You don't need to know, do you?"

The man took out his wallet, spilled the money on the table, and shoved it back toward Mike. "Here's your money. Beat it."

"I want to get a job," Mike said quickly. "Down at the port."

The man took the money back. "You should have told me at the beginning," he said quietly. "How do you expect me to do my job if I don't know what the hell you want? Who do you want a job with?"

"Atlas Provisions."

The man nodded. "Good outfit. They're not too particular." He brought up a jar of india ink from the drawer, then hesitated. "It ain't for me to advise you, son, but are you sure you know what you're doing? Space isn't everything it's cracked up to be, you know. You might get a couple of days out and decide you 'don't like it—but then you'd be stuck."

Everybody was trying to discourage him, Mike thought stubbornly. But he was going to get to the stars. He was going to go if he had to walk every mile of the way and if it took years.

"I've thought about it for a long time. I'm sure."

The man sighed and took a few blank cards and some stationery out of the drawer, then fished around in a small cabinet for an assortment of fine lettering pens. "You'll need a work permit and a letter from your folks and maybe some recommendations and a few other items to back them up. Come back in an hour and you'll be all set."

THE sun was a blinding white off the concrete aprons and the little brass plaques set in them. Mike shielded his eyes and shifted slightly on the back of the fork lift truck that was hauling the train of pallets of concentrated food and

provisions and winding its way among the different aprons. He twisted around. A mile back he could see the green parks and the bunting and waving flags from tall flagpoles that jutted up over the trees.

The truck chugged around another apron and passed the *Empress of Mars*, a huge freighter impossibly balanced on her rear jets. Mike gasped in awe at the twenty story high ship, then let his interest wander to another, even larger ship.

His eyes lowered to the concrete. It was about here, where the old *Ashenden's* berth had been. His eyes searched the ground, found a little brass plaque that he had been shown a picture of once—a long time ago—and then the truck passed it up and it was lost in the distance, a small speck of yellow metal glaring in the sunlight. They were passing other ships now, the *Asteroid Queen*, the *Saturnia*, and the new *Lusitania*—the last a passenger liner with a double row of quartz view-ports around her mid-section.

Elmer Carter—Mike's boss—stopped the truck beneath the support fins of the *Star Quest* and stood up and stretched. He was a fat man with thin arms and even thinner legs; Mike thought he looked like a golf ball on stilts.

The loading crew showed up a minute later and started to man-

handle the crates and boxes to a sling let down from the waist of the ship.

"Okay, Mike, you got the credit sheets?"

Mike felt in the pocket of his atlas uniform and brought out the sheets. Elmer started to check them and the first sling-load went on board. "You keep count too, Mike—we don't want to miss anything."

It was a hot day and by the time they were done, sweat, had stained Elmer's shirt and was rolling down his fat cheeks. He sighed and put away his slips: the last sling load was aboard and the loading crew had gone off to another job. He started the fork lift truck when suddenly Mike said: "Hey, it looks like they forgot something!"

Elmer looked startled. "No kidding!" He got out and waddled to the third pallet back. A small crate had fallen in between the third and fourth pallet-trucks. He picked up the small crate gingerly. "We shoulda caught this, Mike. It's Bl concentrates."

Mike bit his lips. "It's my fault. I'm new on the job and . . ."

Elmer shook his head. "It ain't your fault," he said generously. "Those dumbheads of loaders overlooked it." He looked worried. "They need these, Mike—it'll be my job if they don't get them. And blastoff's only fifteen minutes

away."

It was a hot day and Elmer was already sopping wet and bone tired. He looked up the ladder that crawled up the hull to the port that opened in the waist. It was five stories up, that port. A long haul. A mighty long haul.

Mike watched the look of dismay spread over Elmer's face. It was hot and the port was quiet except for the cries of the loading crew two ships down. Things were on a tight schedule, Mike knew—they wouldn't have time to call the crews back. He tried to make his voice sound casual. "I can take it up and be back in five minutes."

Relief flooded Elmer's face, relief mixed with apprehension over what the company would do if they found out. Letting kids go in the rockets wasn't company policy. He shoved the box in Mike's arms. "Okay, kid, but shake it up. No sight seeing."

Mike tucked the box in his shirt and started up the ladder. The crew was on board and probably strapped down by now, he thought. They were all set to go. His heart started to pound. The *Star Quest* was slated for a lift to Mars and that was a good two month trip. By the end of it, if he worked hard, he could be a third class apprentice. Spacemen—good spacemen—were scarce and it didn't make a heck of a lot of difference how old

you were. The government griped but nobody made much fuss.

He was five stories up now and he turned for one last look at the port of Roswell. Elmer was a tiny figure below him, and the pallets looked like they were made out of match sticks. There were other ships around him, standing up like needles, and then—farther off—the parks and the wide streak of Goddard Boulevard. He could even see the section that was Dream Street. For a minute he thought he could make out Larry's restaurant, then realized he was too far away.

He looked down at Elmer again, hesitating a moment. It would probably mean Elmer's job. He turned back to the port. His heart was pounding and there was a roaring in his ears. He ran a moist thumb over his good luck piece and went in the air lock.

“LOOK, Mr. Gilman, I didn't know who the hell the kid was! He's assigned to work with me and I don't ask questions—nobody's paying me for asking questions! The loaders leave this crate behind and I know it'll mean my job if I don't get it aboard and the kid volunteers to take it up. Do I know he's going to stow away? Look at me, I'm an old man—I can't go climbing five stories of ladder!”

Gilman nodded tiredly. “Okay,

Carter, forget it. I'll fix it up with Atlas so you don't get fired.”

Carter left and “Gilman turned back to the rocket port. Far out on the huge expanse of concrete there was a scorched spot where the *Star Quest* had been a few moments before. He looked at it thoughtfully.

Larry Doby shook his head.

“I thought I had him pretty well talked out of it at the restaurant, Mr. Gilman. Maybe if I had notified you sooner, you could have stopped him.”

“I didn't want to stop him,” Gilman said dryly. “Every ship that leaves this port has provisions for one or two stowaways. A hundred stowaways leave Roswell every month—kids who want to see the stars. We make it difficult for stowaways, scare away those who just want a thrill, but we don't try to stop them, Doby.”

Larry looked puzzled. “I don't get you.”

“All right,” Gilman said slowly, “take Mike. He'll be a good spaceman. His father used to be on the Earth-Moon run; got killed when the pile of the *Ashenden* blew up in '97. That's why Mike was in the Home for the Children of Space. He knows a lot of the ropes already, he picked up a lot from his father. In a way, you might say that Mike was bred for space.” He paused. “And he's got something

pretty valuable, something that will make him one of the best of the lot— and Lord only knows we need them."

"What's that?"

"A long time ago, kids used to run away to sea. There was—well, something that called them. They wanted to go. That's why Mike will be so good on the rockets. He isn't in it for the money, the dangers don't mean anything to him. He's got something you have to have for the job—he *wants* to go."

"I don't know," Larry said thoughtfully. "A lot of kids want to run away for the glamor, you know—visiting strange lands, that sort of thing. What happens when Mike finds out there isn't any glamor, that the exotic foreign places just ain't?"

"The glamor of anything is in the mind of the beholder," Gilman

said slowly.

The sun had started to drop in the sky and a chill wind blew out of the east. Larry shivered. "

"Seems to me like the kid has the short end of the stick. The government gets men for the space-ships but what do they get in turn? What's Mike gonna get out of this?"

Gilman turned a little into the fading sun and Larry caught the tell-tale flecks of flesh-colored tattooing that hid the radiation burns and the ultraviolet scars on Gilman's face.

"What will he get out of this?" Gilman asked slowly, bleakly. His voice filled with frustrated puzzlement at a man who didn't understand, who would never understand. "He'll get the stars, Carter, the stars . . ."

THE END

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